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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #13
Summer
1991

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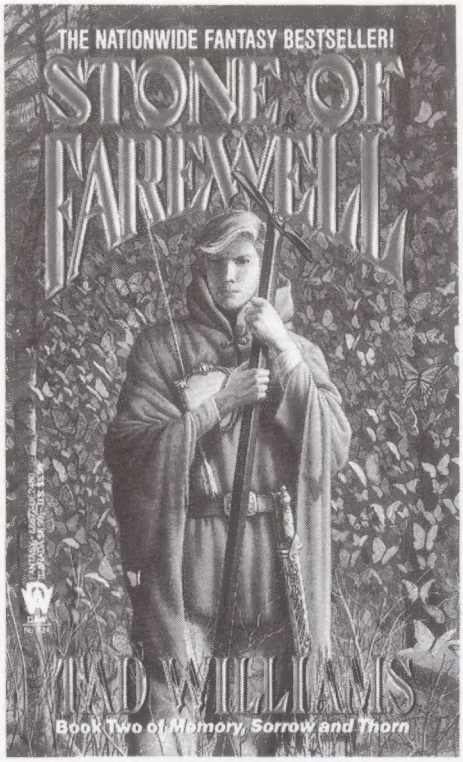

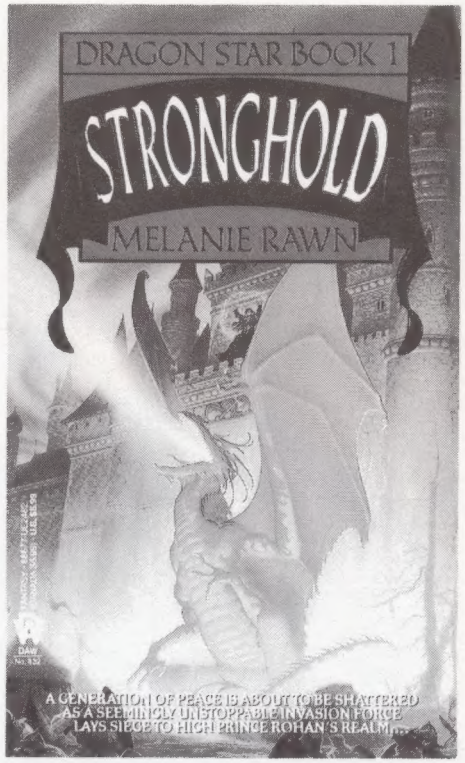
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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
Magazine

EDITORIAL

Elsewhere in this issue I sound off in my writers' column about the whole duty of writers.

One thing — which really falls somewhere within what one woman working in our office dubbed "MZB's Chamber of Commas" — *groan* — is this: learn to *spell*. Learn to use a dictionary.

After all, writing may be an art — but it's also a business — and if you misspell too many words, one of us will have to re-type it before setting it up to print.

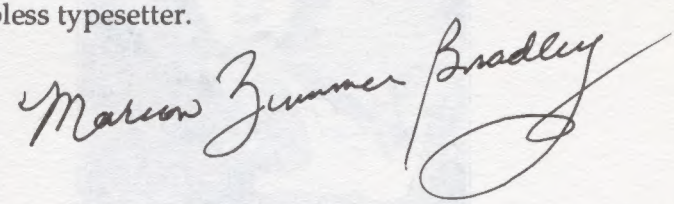
Good spellers are born and not made; it depends on how near you have to a photographic memory — which is a brain function. Most good spellers, myself included, rely on the *look* of a word on the page. Granted also, that if you don't know how to spell a word, you might have some trouble finding it in the dictionary. But that's no excuse. A dictionary is just one of your basic tools, like a typewriter. And even if you were a plumber, you'd have to learn to use a monkey wrench.

There are plenty of times when I think every would-be writer languishing in the slush pile would be the better for a good basic course in grammar.

Failing that, I suggest that before submitting, you go to a good style book or book on grammar and review the proper use of *lie* and *lay*, or *sit* and *set*. In each case, the first named means to rest or repose; the second to place or position. Check it yourself in a grammar textbook. Granted, English rightly does not function by the structured rules more readily applying to Latin. Noah Webster tried to impose it upon English; there is a famous story where Winston Churchill referred to some picky construction as "the sort of English up with which I will not put."

But even without conforming to meticulous rules of grammar, check a good, writer's *style book*. It's your monkey wrench and you have to learn to use it.

Granted, when you become a best-selling writer, you can hire and fire proof-readers. Until then, do your job; don't strain your editor's patience — or that of a hapless typesetter.



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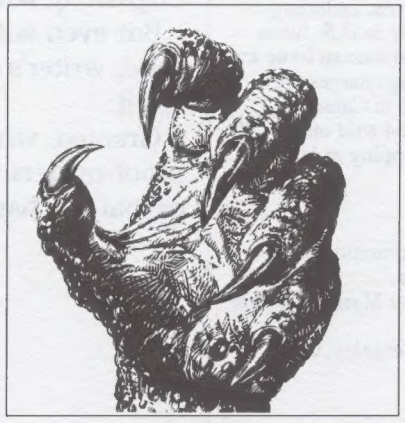

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Artwork by Laura & Kelly Freas;
cover by Frank Kelly Freas

HAUT-CLARE

by eluki bes shahar

This is the story of a man called Brand and a woman called Clare, of a wizard's curse and how they loved despite it, but though it is a long story, it is not a story of how they died.

He was a traveler, and his name was Brand. He had danced for kings on the bloody sand of the eastern Arena and won free of there, and now he sought red gold and soft living, and a place by the fire when the winter snow whipped cold. And if he must fight a house to win these things, then that was how it must be.

Brand had first heard the tale in one of the many ale-houses of the Eastern Spur Road out of Corchado. It told of a house on a high place, or (as it might have been) a castle. Tales varied as to whether this house-keep-castle was now infested by bandits or inhabited by a wizard, but there was a universal agreement upon the fact that it was unlucky to pass beneath it on the road that led through the mountains.

Thus the road was unprofitable for the lord new-come to the region. And eventually Lord Jeofail grew tired of waiting eight weeks longer for his goods to come around the mountains than they would take to travel the fine solid road through them. He gave orders that the whatever-it-might-have-been was to be proven harmless immediately and sent soldiers and priests to see to it.

And stripped of singer's gauderies, it was a way for a landless, masterless man to win a little fame and the right sort of legend — for wouldn't Jeofail reward the man who had saved him the expense of the soldiers and priests by proving the place harmless before they got there?

So Brand had buckled on his witch-slim, delicate, deadly blade and tipped the innkeeper his last silver coin, and gone to carve a fireside place out of might-be demons.

His horse was the best his money could buy, but it was fed on hay, not grain, and the laboring climb up the gravelled switchbacks to the haunted hell-house left it blown and slick with sweat. The sun was westering when he rode the horse through the wizard-keep's gates, and by now he knew that Jeofail's army was a day behind him, if that.

Only one gatepost was still upright, and it was so thick with lichen that its runes were softened away. Brand almost hoped there *were* bandits infesting the place — bandits would at least have hearth and brandy that he could encourage them to share.

He rode into sight of the keep, and thoughts of bandits vanished. Only a wizard would live here.

Something about this place drew and yet repelled him — perhaps there would be a need to earn his legend after all. Brand dismounted from his horse and strode toward the door, his sword flickering lady-bright in his hand.

The evening sun turned his steel to gold and the pale smooth stone of the tower wall to a wilderness of ice. His hand was on the bronze-bound wood of the tower door before Brand saw the symbols cut into the wall beside it. With blunt weathered fingers he traced the upright shape of the sword cut deep into the shining crystal.

This tower was his home.

His home. The place of his earliest memories — sanctuary until the night he had been cursed by enemies and dragged forth into slavery. The place Brand had always been coming back to, through a lifetime of mercenary adventuring.

His hand dropped to his side. Had he — had *they* — been gone so long that all who could aid them were dead? Once again Brand's hand sketched the symbol beside the door. The door did not open to him, and he began to realize that it would not. Ever.

"Clare," he said aloud, and bent his head to weep.

Her ring-mail coat had once been the finest that could be forged: flat rings of hard steel with a spiraling design wrung into their smoking cherry flesh; filled, when the iron was cool, with soft white silver. The rivets holding the iron to the leather beneath had warped and rusted, and much of the silver was worn away, but the mail coat was still chill and heavy against her skin.

It was the only thing she was wearing.

Her hair was an indeterminate shade between white and black. It flung itself upon the wind with the arrogance of a battleflag. Clare shivered and hugged

her bare arms. Her toes curled cowardly away from the gray stone, and she stooped to the ground to retrieve Brand's warm cloak. The great gray sword that she carried grated against the flagstones. She knew nothing of Lord Jeofail, and less of Brand's plan to find and kill a house, but when she saw the sword cut into the crystal beside the tower door she knew why Brand had called her back.

It was dark now. The bitter wind was bitterer still as she first tried the door and then pounded upon it with her small hard fist. She raised her voice above the wind, shouting Brand's name, and her own, and the names of others long dead, but there was no answer.

At last, when full night had come and all hope of entry had died, she mounted the horse and turned back down the path that led to the Eastern Spur Road.

It was a singer's tale: the youth and the maid, fated and destined, forced cruelly apart by magic and revenge. Each rode, each fought, and the sword each struck with was the body of the other. Through all their adventures they had sought their enchanter, but it had occurred to neither Brand nor Clare that in all their long years of wandering he might have died.

Clare sold the contents of the horse's saddlebags for a handful of silver at the first village she reached. She did not ask for a room or a bed, only wine and a seat by the tavern fire. Her eyes were black as cinders and filled with sorrow, and sometimes, as she drank, the servants heard her speak the name of a might-be lover: "Brand. Oh, Brand. *What will we do?*"

On the third day that Clare had sat in the ale house — and, as it happened, on the last day the tavernkeeper would have let her sit there all alone without trying something that she would kill him for — the news came. There was still a wizard in the tower keep. And a very angry one by now.

"— killed six horses and blew the gun-carriage all to hell before —"

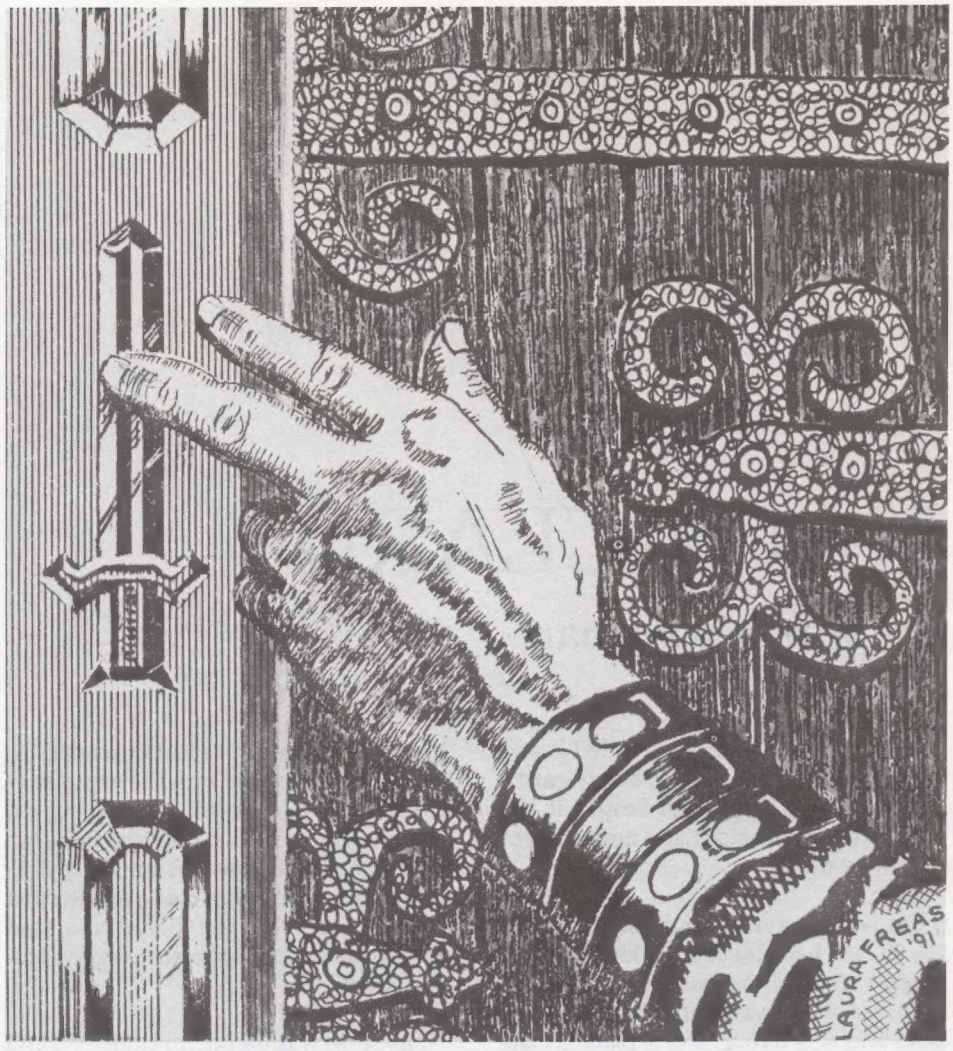
"— a wizard there, certain, with the lightnings he's thrown, but my lord's Crownpriests are more fly nor ary hedge-wizard —"

It was evening, and the talk was all of Jeofail's great enterprise. The common room was full with soldiers and civilian conscripts.

"— blessed all their arrows — aye, and the cannon too, with silver — "

"— what's left of the cannon, you mean."

The woman by the fire lifted her head.



Artwork by Laura Freas

Her face was blurred by sleeplessness and weeping, but there was a purpose and danger about her that was as explicit as the sword she carried.

"Master Rantuil said they'd have yon tower door off its hinges by sun-noon today, and I'm as glad to have three leagues of road between me and that curst place — "

All eyes turned toward her when she stood, and when she walked toward the man who had spoken of Lord Jeofail's siege engineer, they stepped back to make a path for her.

"Tell me of this Rantuil," she said, and waited.

The man looked around himself and saw no sympathy that would let him mock her. There was nothing he could do but answer. "Master Rantuil is the chief of my lord's pioneers — it's him as said he'd have that wizard's den open easy as shelling a nut."

Clare nodded as if he had said more than he had. "And do you think him an honest man?"

"Oh, aye, missy; what Rantuil says he'll do is done," said someone who had not seen her face, and others as far away muttered agreement. She moved then, and before any there could think of what sport it might be to stop her, she was through the door and running toward the rude livery where her horse was stabled.

This time the keep was ablaze with light. Clare rode toward it and saw that Rantuil had indeed done as he had promised and forced the tower door against a wizard's strength. The grass outside the castle smoldered sullenly, and there was scorched earth everywhere. The tower's lower windows were alight with the torches Lord Jeofail's men had brought, but the sanctum door had not yet been forced, and the wizard behind it was alive.

The animal between her knees caught some madness from the smoke and flame. Its hooves rang staccato off the hard earth, and then off stone, and the sound they made was —

Clare-clare-clare

—the name that had once been shouted for her in the Arena. She remembered how she had danced there, and the perfumed ladies had flung flowers down into the filthy sand. The bright light of slaughter was in her eyes, and before Jeofail's soldiers had time to arm she was in the midst of them, vaulting from horseback with a white flash of thigh and the killing whisper of bare calloused soles upon the flagstones. The burning blade she swung above her head pulled her small breasts high, so that in the midst of reaching for spear and shield the soldiers must stop to mark the wonder of it. And then the sword found its first rest, and the dance upon the killing floor began.

Turn and pivot and turn again, the great gray sword she carried slicked with blood until it flashed in the torchlight. Clare found all the soft unprotected places of a man; wherever the sword she carried struck it killed, and all the while she was making her way toward the stair that led to the wizard's chamber.

But she was only lightly armored. Jeofail's men locked their shields against her, and then she was down, screaming with the pain of a spear thrust cowardly through her thigh from behind.

But it was Brand who turned, cat-lithe in the spilled blood with no wound upon him, and grabbed the nearest shield by its bottom lip. His muscles corded with effort as he dragged it from its owner's hands, and then he stood and swung it as if it were a harvest flail. The soldiers fell back, crying sorcery, and Brand stooped to recover the light and deadly blade that lay at his feet.

They came at him again then, and he blinded two men with his delicate blade before he had the mass of them where he wanted them. A moment's sword-dance, and somehow no one any longer barred the path he sought. Brand fled up the curving stairs to where the wizard fought his last defense.

But the last defense was over. The door was broken in, and the siege engine stood abandoned by all save dead men. Brand did not stop to think but dragged at it until it moved on unoiled wheels, and shoved and strained until he had tilted it to slide back down the stairs he had just come up.

The ram was both heavy and fragile. The screams that echoed up the stairwell told him where it had stuck, blocking access to the wizard's chamber for some good time to come. He listened for a moment more, then turned back.

And Clare, skin-whole, stepped over the body that lay in the doorway. The lightning musk of sorcery hung in the air. The dead man had worn Jeofail's colors once, before his surcoat had been burnt away and the iron chain beneath melted to bright separate gobbets in the dead flesh.

The wizard's inner room had walls and floor and ceiling of black glass, and echoed like a jug; Clare heard, before she saw or smelled it, the bright steady drip-drip-drip of rilling blood.

The wizard clung to his lectern, holding himself upright with defiant effort. Silver had killed him; the dagger lay on the floor, its soft metal bent with the strike and red with its success.

"If you've come to help — either side — you're a little late." The pool at his feet grew large enough to spill; he coughed, and there was more blood on the front of his plain wool robe.

"Father," Clare said, and he knew her then. He smiled, crooked and wet.

"You were the most beautiful of my children — once. I may have regretted sacrificing you." He took a deep breath, and something seemed to tear inside. His face went ghastly. "They've won. If you've come to gloat, you'd better hurry."

"Free us, Father." She took a quick step forward, and her feet reddened with his blood. "We've done all you ever asked of us — free us now."

He coughed again, and drooled, inglorious and scarlet. His fingers relaxed against the lectern, but Clare was there to ease him to the floor. She had to bend close to catch the thready whisper of his next words.

"You've come on a fool's errand, child. It was not made to be broken, but all spells end with the death of the enchanter. Didn't you know?"

And then he died, and the spell was ended, and only truth remained. Brand and Clare: fated and destined. Two creatures of the same kind, eternally divided — each doomed alternately to take an alien form.

But the alien form had been human.

Two swords lay upon the cold flags, to await the soldiers that would come and find them. One slender and glittering, one bright and deadly.

This was not the end. They were two swords forged to outlast the hands of many warriors. Their steel would be sharp and their edges thirsty for a thousand generations, and the legends would speak of him as Burning, and of her as Very Bright.

Haut Clare.

❧

ELUKI BES SHAHAR is the author of three sf novels. The first, *Hellflower*, was published by DAW in June and is nothing like *Haut-Clare*. She is better known as Regency writer Rosemary Edgehill, whose fourth book, *Fleeting Fancy*, will be published by St. Martin's Press next spring. *Fleeting Fancy* is also nothing like *Haut-Clare*, but Ms. bes shahar's other short stories (like the one in the July issue of *Dragon* Magazine and the one in *Sword & Sorceress #8*) are, or so she tells us.

All three short stories are set in Crownland, where she hopes someday to set something longer than 2500 words.

KELLY AND LAURA FREAS' work is well-known to fantasy fans. They live near Los Angeles.

Winners of last issue's

Cauldron

voting

- First Place: **"The Girl" – Donald Backman**
- Second Place: **"The Stone Unicorn" – John P. Buentello**
- Third Place: **"Sunrise" – Leslie Ann Miller**

Our congratulations to the winners, and our thanks to all of you who took the time to vote!

Your interest and enthusiasm mean a lot to us at

FANTASY
Magazine

Artwork by Barb Armata

According to Custom

by G.E. Gaines

The Witch lived in a small house that had crow's legs. At present her home was beside the road near a well just outside a very small village. Tomorrow was another matter—a house with legs can go anywhere it wants.

Right now, though, the Witch's house was beside the road and she had a visitor.

He was a knight, wearing full armor and riding a large roan charger.

"I need help," the Knight yelled to the Witch, for his charger didn't like houses with legs and refused to go near enough for civilized conversation.

"Maybe I can help you," the Witch called back. "Maybe not."

The Knight got off his charger to speak properly with the Witch, and the Witch had her house sit down so that her porch was only a step above the ground.

The Knight approached her but didn't say anything. He just took off his helmet.

The Witch looked at him.

"Ummmmph," the Witch finally managed. She had seen a lot of horrible things in her life. Zombies, monsters, demons, month-long-dead bodies. None were as bad as the Knight.

"You're not so pretty looking yourself," the Knight commented back.

"But I'm two hundred years old," said the Witch. "And I don't have to look at myself. I have to look at you. You don't want me to use magic to make you look better, do you?" The Witch was pretty good with magic, but she wasn't *that* good. He was one ugly-looking man.

His right eye was ugly, sunk in like a pig's eye, yet still managing to bug out. His left eye (which didn't look like his right eye) was ugly in a more bug-eyed, squinty sort of way. Neither eyebrow matched, and the Witch had never before considered the possibility of a forehead being ugly. All the rest of the Knight's facial accouterments were equally unbalanced, misformed, and grotesque. And putting them all together made him ten times uglier.

"I have had magic used to make me look better," the Knight said, growling, which made him look worse. "They say they can't make me look any better than this."

The Witch stopped herself from asking how bad he looked *before* magic was used on him. Instead she asked, "What kind of help do you want?"

"I want a wife," he told her.

"I can see where that might be a problem."

He growled again.

"A more agreeable temper might help you," the Witch suggested.

"No woman gets past my looks," he said.

"I can understand that," she agreed. "Why don't you have one of those 'arranged' marriages? Where she doesn't see you until it is too late."

"I don't want a wife that screams. Women who see me on the street do that. So how can I get a wife?"

So the Witch thought upon the matter.

And she thought.

"How about getting very rich? There must be some woman who will marry you for money?"

"I tried that," he said. "I'm richer than most kings."

The Witch decided to multiply her standard rate — for whatever she managed to think up — by ten.

"Talking about kings made me remember something," she continued. "The King of Coravia has a problem with a giant who's eating people. He will give half his kingdom and his daughter in marriage to whoever will kill..."

The Knight interrupted, "The King of Arviri had the same deal two years ago. Only his problem was a two-headed ogre. I killed the ogre. Now I have half a kingdom, too."

"What about the princess of Arviri?"

"She jumped out of a tower window when she saw me."

"Oh, my goodness! She killed herself!" He was ugly-looking, but that ugly? Maybe at two hundred years old she was too old to remember how much looks count?

"No, she didn't kill herself," the Knight explained. "It was a second story window. She just broke some bones. I didn't like her. I said she didn't have to marry me."

"You want to *like* who you're going to marry?" the Witch asked. An ugly man can't be choosy.

"I won't marry a screamer. And I won't marry a fainter. That princess was a fainter."

The Witch could see the Knight's point. "Why do you want to get married?"

"I just want a wife." He started growling again.

So the Witch thought some more about it.

"How about doing something so wonderful a woman felt like she had to marry you?"

"Like rescuing her from a dragon?"

"Yes." According to custom, a damsel-in-distress married the knight-in-shining-armor who rescued her. "Now, we have this dragon, not five miles down the road..."

"I tried it once," the Knight interrupted again. "I beat a dragon in a fair fight. The dragon flew away before I killed it. Have you ever seen a princess in a long dress chasing a dragon? Have you ever seen a princess screaming at the Dragon to stop and save her?"

The Witch coughed politely. "No, I haven't."

The Witch thought some more; several hours more.

"Have you ever thought of getting some

woman 'used' to you before bringing up the subject of marriage?"

"My mother never got used to me."

It was getting late. The Witch decided that if she had a chance to sleep on the matter she might come up with something. So the Knight took care of his charger while the Witch fixed some dinner.

"How about a love charm?" she asked the next morning after a pancake breakfast.

"Those things don't work," he said.

"No, they don't work the way people think they do," the Witch agreed. "There always has to be an attraction to begin with."

"First," he said, "I don't attract anyone. Second, I'm not falling in love with some woman who can't even stand the sight of me."

"No, no, not those two-way love charms," the Witch said. "A safe one-way love charm. If it catches her right when she first sees you and still thinks good thoughts about you. Like right after saving her from a dragon. Then, well, she may not love you, but you might not disgust her either."

"What do you have in mind?" He was interested.

"Remember that dragon? Say you go and save the poor girl. She isn't going to see you right off. Not with that armor helmet. But she is going to be glad you rescued her. If, at that point, she gets zapped by the love charm...then she might not scream when she sees you."

"Or faint?"

"Maybe not that either."

"Would it work?"

"Don't know. You'll just have to try it. But, there will be a bigger problem."

"What?"

"She may not hate you, but you're still going to have to get her to marry you."

"If only I had that problem!" said the Knight. "Make this charm, Witch. I have a dragon to kill!"

The Witch made the charm, gave the standard warning about not letting anyone else see it first, and provided directions to the Dragon's lair. The Knight paid her ten times her normal "love charm" rate, mounted his war horse, and rode down the road.

When he neared the Dragon's lair, the Knight got off his horse. He checked around. After determining that no one else was around, he remounted the charger and put the love charm around his neck.

Lastly, the Knight put on his helmet and pulled out his sword.

"Yo! Dragon! Let's fight!" he yelled.

"Hear that?" the Dragon said.

"I do," she answered.

"Kidnapping you was the best thing I ever did," the Dragon said. "Some fool has been coming to rescue you every week ever since." Dragons only eat about once a week. The Dragon smiled, thinking about past and presently-arriving dinners.

"It's plain nasty, if you ask me," said the Damsel.

"I didn't ask," the Dragon said. And left.

The Dragon was not one of those great, large dragons; for there are many kinds of dragons. This dragon was almost small for a dragon, with no wings, and definitely did not breathe fire. Still, the Dragon weighed half a ton and had a mouthful of sharp teeth.

This Dragon was a Forest Dragon. In the woods it is dangerous to breathe fire. The whole forest could burn down, and with a lot of trees it's hard to fly anyway. Instead, the Dragon had a beautifully green mottled patterned color; long, strong legs to climb trees with; and wonderfully sharp retractable claws. As such, Forest Dragons have a smart way to fight. They climb up into the trees, then jump down on whatever they're hunting, be it boar, deer, or knight.

As always the Dragon climbed through the trees and waited until the "attacking" knight was below, then jumped, knocking the Knight off his horse.

"Hello," the Dragon said, sitting on top of the Knight.

"Hello?" he managed back. So much for life, horrible as it had been.

"Can I help you?" the Dragon asked.

"I was just looking for the Damsel you were distressing."

"I'm not sitting on you too heavily?" the Dragon asked, concerned.

"Not really," the Knight answered. The Dragon was mostly off him. Besides, wearing armor helped distribute the weight.

"What about the Damsel?" the Dragon asked.

"What about her?" he asked back.

"What are you looking for her for?"

"Aren't you going to eat me?" the Knight finally *had* to ask.

The Dragon was shocked. "Why should I do that?"

"I thought that was just what was done," the Knight said.

"Dragons can do whatever they want," the Dragon answered.

He thought about that. It seemed true. "Could I get up?"

"Sure."

Soon he was standing and the Dragon was looking him over. "I didn't hurt you?"

"I'll have bruises," the Knight said, "but I am fine."

"I suppose since you were looking for the Damsel then you want to see her?" the Dragon said. "I have her in my cave. This way."

The Knight obeyed the Dragon. What else could he do? He was beaten.

"She's in there," the Dragon said when they reached the cave.

He went in first. The Dragon followed.

She stood up as he entered.

She was beautiful. The most beautiful woman ever. Easy! And he had seen a lot of (screaming, fainting) women in his day.

She was thin and tall, graceful and fair, with a lovely face with ruby lips. She had fantastic sparkling green eyes and a body...*what a body!*

The Knight took off his helmet. The sooner he found out the better.

The Damsel opened her mouth in shock. Her face turned pale. She reached out and put her hand on the cave wall to steady herself.

But she didn't faint. And she didn't scream.

The love charm worked!

Only now what was he going to do?

The Knight was expecting your normal, everyday sort of damsel-in-distress.

All damsels-in-distress are called "the most beautiful and lovely". That is just so knights will go rescue them. Everyone knows that.

Normally, the damsels-in-distress are only plain to very good looking. None of them were anything like this woman standing in front of him.

She was totally, completely, absolutely, in every way possible, beautiful. Gorgeous.

How could he ever convince a woman like her to marry him!? She might be charmed, but she couldn't be crazy.

The Damsel swallowed, then managed a very strained, "Hello."

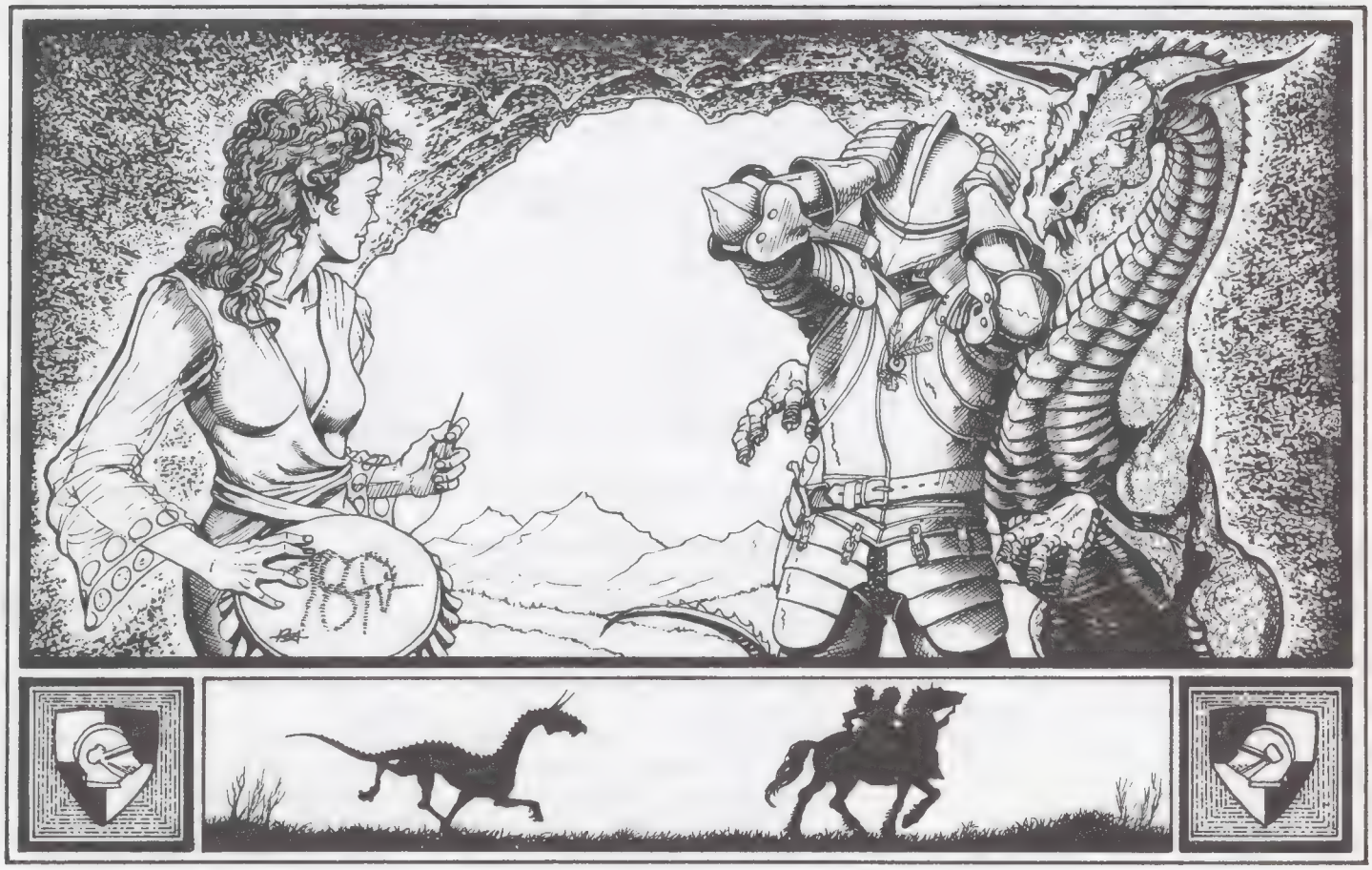
"I didn't disturb you?" the Knight asked.

"No. I was just doing some needlepoint." There wasn't much else for her to do in the Dragon's cave.

"Oh." He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Have you come to rescue me?" The Damsel was naturally a little bit confused, for the Dragon was standing right behind the Knight.

"Of course he has," the Dragon said.



Artwork by Barb Armata

"He is only the most bravest, most wonderfullest knight there ever was."

"Well..." he began.

"Would you like to see my treasure room now?" the Dragon asked. The Damsel had been looked at. "I do have a nice collection of gold and jewels..."

"No, it's okay," said the Knight. "She's a treasure."

"A bother mostly," the Dragon disagreed. "She has to be fed. Now, I have this diamond as big..."

"Would you like to go now?" the Knight asked the Damsel.

"Yes, I hate needlepoint."

"If you want to go, sure," said the Dragon.

"Fine." How could he stop the Dragon?

They went back to where the Knight had left the horse. The Knight helped the Damsel get on the horse.

"We can come back later for my jewels and gold," said the Dragon.

He climbed up on the horse. The Damsel was sitting in front of him. He had to put his arms around her to hold the reins. That did bad things to his breathing.

"I have half a kingdom," he told the Damsel.

"Great!" the Dragon said. "Plenty of room for me."

"My father is just a poor knight," said the Damsel.

The Dragon walked alongside the horse. The horse did not like that, but as a war horse he had been trained to endure close contact with the "enemy".

The Knight continued, "I am rich. And have two castles."

"Of course you do," agreed a very impressed Dragon.

"Where are you taking me?" asked the Damsel.

"According to custom..." he began but could not finish.

"You're married already," she guessed, a little too hopefully.

"No."

"Engaged?"

"No." Then he managed to say, "Well...the custom...is that you're to marry...me."

"That is the custom," she agreed quietly.

"It's just an old custom," he said quickly. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"And *you* don't have to if *you* don't want to," the Dragon told the Knight.

"You don't want to marry me?" she asked.

"Of course he doesn't," said the Dragon. "You're too skinny."

"I didn't mean it that way," he said. "It's...it's...you're not acting like your real self. You're under a magic spell. I'm wearing a love charm."

"Oh, so that's what that thing is?" She had been wondering about the feathers and things he was wearing around his neck but was too polite to ask. "Why?"

"So that you'd fall in love with me," he started to correct himself, "I mean, so that..."

"I'm not in love with you," she told him.

"I am," the Dragon said.

"Huh?" he pulled the charger to a stop.

"It isn't one of those 'love at first sight' things, is it?" the Damsel asked.

The Dragon was happily looking at the Knight.

"Yes."

"Then I think you're in trouble," the Damsel said. "This dragon is a she."

"A she?" He looked at the Dragon. How did one go about telling that with a dragon?

The Dragon smiled broadly at him.

"Dragons are both she's and he's," the Damsel said. "Or else there wouldn't be little dragons. Who made the love charm?"

"A Witch who was living down near

the well along the road," said the Knight. "It's not far from here."

"Then we better get there before she decides to make her house walk to someplace else."

The Knight turned his horse back toward the Witch's house.

The Dragon just sighed, deeply, and came with them.

The Knight stopped himself from moaning.

"I hope it is one of those undo-able spells," the Damsel said.

Suddenly a thought occurred to the Knight. "Hey! How come you don't hate me?"

"What?" she asked.

"I said I love you," the Dragon said.

"These charms only work once," the Knight said. "The Witch figured that at least you might not hate me if the spell worked on you. And it didn't."

"How could I ever hate you?" The Dragon almost purred.

This time the Knight did moan.

"Why would I hate you?" asked the Damsel. That was one use for love charms she hadn't heard of.

"Most women do."

"Silly things," said the Dragon.

"Well, you are rather unattractive." She figured that was a polite way to say it.

"You're handsome," the Dragon disagreed.

She said, "Being...disgusted isn't hatred."

"I love you," said the Dragon again. "I think you're handsome even without scales."

He tried hard to ignore the Dragon. "For most people hate and disgust is the same thing. Aren't you disgusted by me?"

"*No!*" said the Dragon.

"It isn't your fault," said the Damsel.

"No," he agreed. And he had tried to improve it with magic.

"So why should I hold it against you?" the Damsel asked.

He couldn't disagree with her. He had been telling that to people for years. "But people do. They hate me on sight."

"Terrible!" exclaimed the Dragon.

"I understand your problem," the Damsel said.

"How could you understand?" He wasn't sure if the Damsel was talking about him being ugly or the Dragon.

"Do you love me?" she asked, changing the subject.

He surprised himself. "No." He didn't love her. But he never really planned on loving any woman. He never wanted to love anyone who didn't love him, and he figured no woman could ever love him.

"But you are attracted to me?" the Damsel asked.

"Yes," he admitted. There was a lot of her to be attracted to.

"Most men are," she said. "Only they think attraction is love. So I understand how you feel."

"There's a big difference between love and hate."

"Perhaps," she said. "But there is still a lot alike too. One look at me and most men are down on their knees saying they've always loved me and want to marry me. What they are feeling isn't love."

"There's still a big difference between love and hate."

"We're really talking about disgust and attraction or lust..." She shrugged. The argument no longer mattered. They reached the Witch's house where the Witch was hanging out various laundered apparel on a line attached to her eaves and a nearby tree.

"What happened?" the Witch asked. She was looking mostly at the Dragon.

The Knight got down off the horse and helped the Damsel down. "The love charm worked...on the *dragon*!"

"Yes, isn't that *wonderful*?" the Dragon said.

"My, my, my," the Witch could only say, shaking her head. "And I did make it extra strong, considering..."

"Considering!" he yelled. "You're going to fix things and fix them *now*!"

"Don't be impolite," the Damsel told the Knight.

"Thank you, dear," the Witch patted the Damsel's hand.

"But she messed up everything!" the Knight said.

"Did not," the Dragon disagreed.

"You're the sneaky one," the Damsel said. "Trying to use a love charm on me."

"I shall make the cure," the Witch decided. She ignored the Knight, the Damsel, and the Dragon and went into her house.

"Don't call him a sneak," the Dragon said to the Damsel.

"He is so a sneak," the Damsel said.

"Is not."

"Is so."

"Is not."

"Is so."

"I have to be sneaky," he said. "That's the only way I can keep a woman from screaming or fainting when she sees me."

The Damsel screamed.

The Witch rushed out of the house.

"I refuse to faint," the Damsel said, hands on her hips. "Are you happy now?"

"I think you're crazy," he said.

The Dragon nodded in agreement and wrapped her long neck around the Knight.

"Children!" the Witch said. She went back into her house.

"I am not crazy," the Damsel said.

The Witch reappeared, arms, hands, and pockets full. An iron pot floated behind her.

"You have to be crazy if you think being loved by everyone is the same as being hated. Crazy." He tried to ignore the Dragon who was fluttering her eyelashes at him.

"It is the same," the Damsel insisted.

"It's not," the Dragon said, taking the Knight's side, then murmured in his ear, "I love you."

"I don't love you!" he exclaimed. He was all out of patience with women. Witch women. Human women. Dragon women.

"*Oooooooahhhhh!*" The Dragon started crying.

The Witch shook her head and started a fire under the pot with a magic spell.

The Knight unwound her neck from him and pushed the Dragon away.

"That was nasty," the Damsel said.

"I don't love her," he repeated.

The Witch continued to add things to the pot from the many pockets in her apron.

"Well, it's *your* fault she loves you. You and that stupid love charm," the Damsel said.

"It's her stupid charm," he said pointing at the Witch. "Her idea, even."

"You did it, though," the Damsel said, while trying to comfort the Dragon by wiping the Dragon's tears with the hem of her gown.

"If only the road to true love weren't so rocky," the Witch muttered. She went back into her hut for more dried toads.

"I had good reason," the Knight said.

"A good reason?" she asked. "To trick me?"

"To trick me!" wailed the Dragon more correctly.

"I wasn't going to trick you," he tried to explain. "I just wanted you not to hate me."

"You would have been perfectly happy if I had fallen in love with you," she said. "You're just like any man!"

"*Oooaahh*, but I fell in love with him," the Dragon cried.

The Witch came out and put two toads in the pot. She looked at the Dragon, then added two more.

"But I did tell you about it," he said.

The Damsel almost said something. He had told her, but she was still angry. "I don't care about men who think so low of me that they think I'm going to scream at them. Or faint. You're a tricky, dishonest sneak."

"I had to be."

"Did not."

"Did not," the Witch agreed with the Damsel.

The Knight glared at the Witch.

The Witch said, "She doesn't hate you, though goodness knows why not."

He realized that again. "She doesn't, does she? Why not?"

"It isn't your fault," the Damsel said as before.

"Come here, Dragon," the Witch ordered. She sniffed the brew. "I added some chicken bones to make it taste better."

"Well," the Damsel said to the Knight. "I figured that for the first time a man would be doing something for me that wasn't because of my looks. Rescuing me because I needed to be rescued. So I decided not to hold it against him if he fell madly in love with me."

"She thinks a lot of herself, doesn't she?" the Knight asked the Witch.

The Witch was busy pouring the brew down the Dragon's throat and only said, "Better than grouchy you."

"Well, I didn't fall madly in love with you," he told her.

"That's the only thing I don't hold against you," she told him.

"You don't hate me, and I don't love you," he said, thinking. "Doesn't sound like a bad start."

"True," the Damsel agreed, thinking about it herself. "Let's talk about it as we go to your castle."

"Fine enough. But nothing is certain. Customs aren't ironclad."

"Stupid of them to be," she agreed.

He helped her back up on the horse.

"You'd look better if you combed your hair to the other side," she told him.

He climbed up behind her. "You wouldn't look so...so...if you didn't wear your dress so low in the front."

"What kind of woman do you think I am?" she asked him as they started down the road. "I don't dress like this. The Dragon kidnapped me in the middle of the night. This is my nightgown."

"In the middle of the night...? Terrible. Perhaps we should stop at your home and get you some..."

"I feel awful," the Dragon said, lying spread out, flat on her belly with her head in the Witch's lap.

The Witch patted the Dragon's head. "The effects will wear off soon."

"To be in love with a *human*... oooooaaaahhhh."

"It wasn't your fault, dearie."

"But I wanted to lay his egg!" The Dragon shuddered.

"Now, now. Just close your eyes. Go to sleep. When you wake up, all this will seem like a bad dream."

❧

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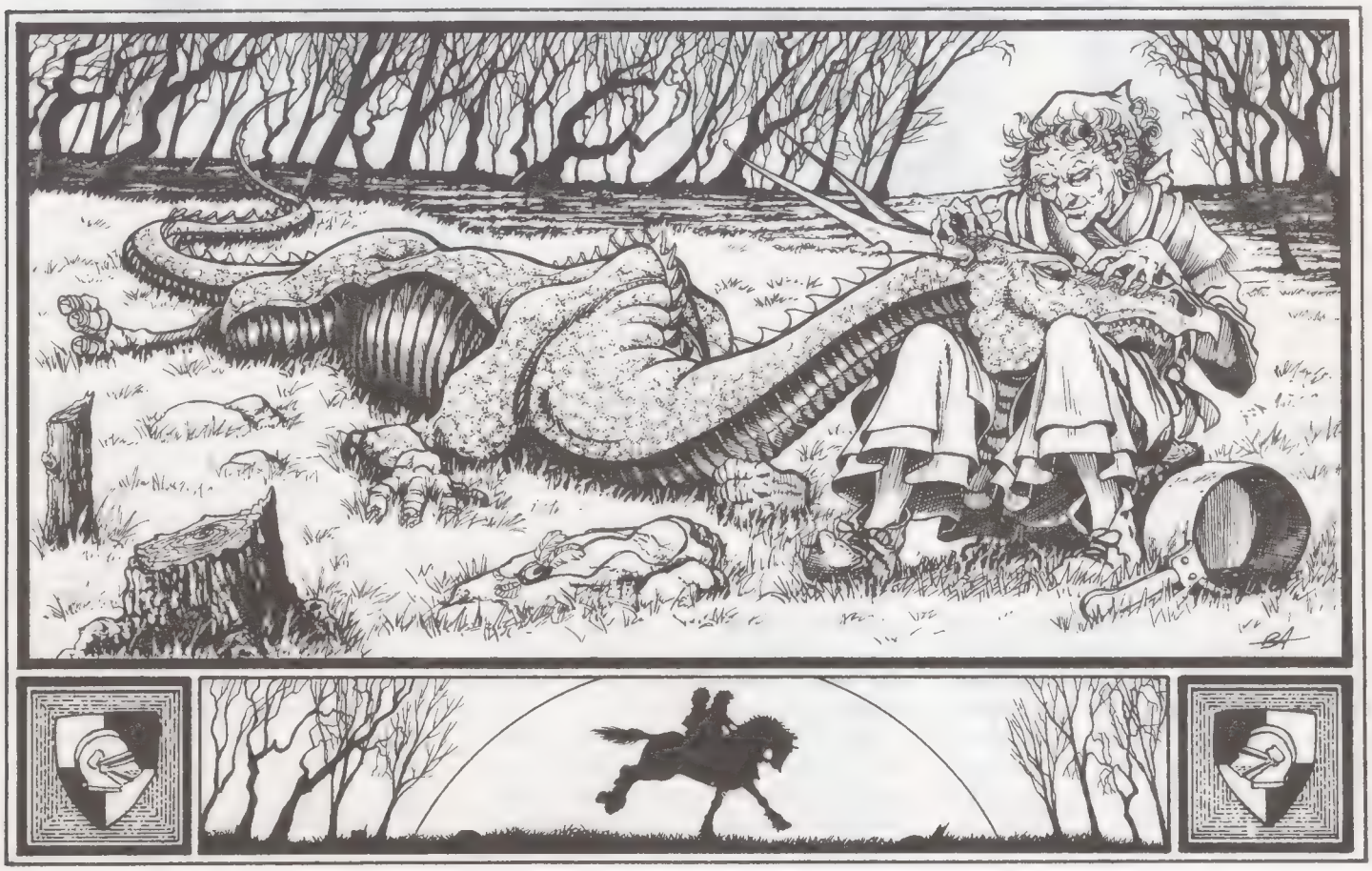
Barb Armata's business card says "Illustrations of the Old, the Alien, and the everyday". A love of horses drew her into art, and André Norton drew her into sf & fantasy. She lives in the Berkshires and exhibits regularly at large NE sf cons.



Artwork by Barb Armata

Flight of Fancy

by Morgan Noel

Artwork by Alan Giana

Empty, the apartment quivered and fluttered as a cold breeze blew through it. The back door, which led to the fire escape, was open and slamming back and forth in its frame. Outside, the fire escape shook with the vibrations of two pounding feet.

It was a night for flying.

The vibrating of the black metallic fire escape stopped as Yaz McKelvey stepped onto the roof of his apartment building. His eyes flicked about as he oriented himself on the smallish area. The top floor loft blocked off this rear part of the roof from the front, and made it a little alcove far above Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Yaz stepped quickly and surely to the edge of the roof, squinting once or twice as the wind blew into his face. The roof next door was a hefty drop below. If he decided to risk the jump, he had a good chance to break something. A leg, arm, face, whatever.

From the apartment building behind Yaz's, the *1812 Overture* occasionally punched its way through the shiver of the night. Yaz strained for the sound as the wind molded the cotton of his sweatshirt to his body.

The jump was very clearly not a suicide in Yaz's mind. He nudged the idea around as his hair fluttered. He was certain that he wanted to come through the experience intact and breathing. But it was important that he knew why he was jumping. Once he finally analyzed the idea, he realized that its core was risk.

For the past three months after graduation from college, Yaz had found an apartment, found a job, found a niche, but he hadn't found himself. The actuary job was temporary, he told himself, until he set himself up as an illustrator, a painter. An artist. Right now, sitting in his abandoned, wind-swept apartment was a blank easel, one that he had been unable to fill after hours — be honest, days — of staring. Then, as the unpainted space mocked him, Yaz had realized that he was missing something. Inside him, there was an essential weight missing,

and until that weight appeared, the easel would remain a blank testament to his light emptiness. He had run to the fire escape and climbed to the roof only half knowing what he was doing.

He thought about the artists he admired. They weren't all dangerous, deadbeat alcoholics, but most of them worked pretty hard at it. They all had that unstable core, that sense of risk-taking. So he decided to fulfill the compulsion for risk. Destabilize his own boring core.

It was after two in the morning on a Friday night, and the guaranteed danger of Central Park beckoned. But Yaz decided that the park was too far a walk. The roof was a more convenient risk, one a bit closer to home.

So now he measured the distance between his roof and the next. He flexed his knees and took deep breaths.

With the influx of oxygen, a certain coolness of attitude struck him. He took a disassociated look at what he was about to do, and he had a dim realization of how stupid it was. Jump off a roof?

On the other hand, this might be the last chance. If he didn't take the plunge (so to speak) now, he might stare at that blank easel for fifty years of actuarial work, while the white canvas faded to yellow, then brown, in a useless inertia, a constant mocking failure until he threw it in the back of a dusty closet with the rest of his dreams and he joined the rest of the sleepwalkers in the city. A paycheck here, a purchase there, a lot of bitching, and one missed opportunity forever. The next fifty years as a doomed, bitter number cruncher and spreadsheet abuser. It was going to take something drastic to offset those dull years. One serious whale of a jumpstart.

So Yaz McKelvey took a bracing step backwards, rocked himself once, then flung himself out into the air.

He had promised himself he would keep his eyes open the whole way, a jump that would take less than a second. But then he realized he'd jumped more than a bit too hard, and he was heading in a perfectly carved arc, straight toward the large skylight that filled the middle part of his proposed landing spot. The arc was carved, not curved, because at the end of it, going through the skylight, Yaz would end up sliced and diced.

It's amazing how many obscenities the average person can cram into the average half-a-second, and Yaz had justification for the Olympic swearing performance he provided. He started something like this:

"OH, NONONONONONONONO..."

And he ended approximately like this:

"...NONONONONONONONO! EEEYOW!"

Then, his eyes firmly closed, his lips drawn back from his teeth, Yaz plopped lightly in the air, about a half-foot above the center of the skylight. Suspended in mid-air, he flopped like a fish escaping the hook.

Deus ex machinas have a way of brightening any day. Or night.

It took him a second to put his lips back across his teeth, then another second to pry his eyes open. Face back in proper order, Yaz looked about himself. It's important to look very closely when laws of physics are being flouted.

He was floating, flying, levitating, however you wanted to name it, but he was doing it. It felt kind of nice. Perhaps he accepted the defiance of universal realities with an unexpected bit of nonchalance, but Yaz often dreamt about flying, and this was exactly how his dreams had felt. Without hesitation, Yaz knew what kind of effort it would take to fly a little higher, swoop a little lower.

A moment before he had been a fleshy bomb heading for a skylight explosion; now he was an unlikely aviator, and he felt perfectly correct. An artist-in-training has to be open-minded, Yaz thought.

He half-bounded, half-floated from the center of the skylight to the edge of the building. He looked down at the cross street below. And, very easily, he dove down into the air currents that blew in the street below.

That was the final proof, for Yaz, that he wasn't dreaming. He was never bothered or affected by air currents when he dream-flew. This was reality, if a warped version, and the cold wind pushing him about was solid — er, gaseous — proof.

"Whoooo-hoooo!" Yaz McKelvey screamed, hovering in midair.

As he zipped about in the air above the relatively abandoned street, Yaz wondered what to do next. In dreams, there wasn't much choice to be made about the course of action. You just kept dreaming and things happened.

As Yaz wondered, Julia Traynor turned onto the street, reading a hardback book in the bright NYC streetlights. Julia was someone who always occupied Yaz McKelvey's attention immediately. She was a mid-sized, dark-haired woman of exceptional intelligence, for whom Yaz had an almost unbearable sexual desire. No, Yaz corrected himself, it wasn't just sex. Not *just* sex.

One night, Yaz had sat down and analyzed his feelings about Julia, and he had realized that he just simply adored Julia and wanted to experience her as fully as possible. He wanted to share and explore her every nook and cranny. It was a simple curiosity about a woman that had expanded into a fetish.

But since it was more adoring curiosity (curious adoration?) than anything else, Yaz had been entirely unable to push their relationship into anything more than friendship. Every time he decided he wanted to goose the friendship into something more aggressive (and hopefully sweaty), he thought how he'd explain his desire. Sure, he was vaguely curious about her major body parts, but it was the organic *details* that really drove his interest.

"Um, Julia, I'd really like to see the way your stomach curves into your legs."

"What?!"

"I'd also like to see how your armpit curves down into your ribcage."

"You what?!"

"And the small of your back. And the back of your knee. And the top of your foot. And..."

Even his imaginary conversations about the idea were humiliating to the point of farce. One time, he dreamed what the entire conversation would be like in French, and it wasn't much better. It *sounded* more romantic, but a screamed *"Quoi?!"* was just as embarrassing as "What?!" Besides, Yaz also dreamed of himself wearing a beret, ridiculously tight jeans, and smoking harsh cigarettes. That dream had been a definite low point in his hoped-for relationship.

And then there was the time he had serenaded her over and over with the Beatles' song "Julia". Sometimes being cheesy was the only option. After ten minutes, she had merrily joined in. Their duet had lasted another ten minutes until Yaz had finally manufactured an excuse to get away before he started laughing, crying, or throttling Julia.

Now, he hovered nervously above her head, debating exactly how to approach the issue from his unlikely vantage point. At least, he laughed, he had a new way to sweep her off her feet.

He decided that the Bard had it right, writing about faint hearts and ladies fair. An aggressive approach would suit the situation best.

He dropped to within inches of the sidewalk, directly in her path. As she stepped right up to him, he could see she had her nose stuck deep in a copy of

Stephen King's latest novel. Seeing that, he had momentary hesitations. He wanted to bring her into a romantic interlude, not shock her into a myocardial-coronary-infarcted whatever. But he steeled himself.

"Julia," Yaz said, quietly. Enthralled in her book, she didn't notice.

"Julia," he said, louder. She looked up, startled. Then she illuminated the street around her with her smile. She had the whitest teeth Yaz had ever seen.

"Oh, hi, Yaz. What's going on?" she asked.

"Dance with me," he answered. Without waiting for an assent, he grasped her around the waist with his right arm while his left hand anchored itself in her right armpit. Then he shot into the air, accompanied by her shocked cry. Understandably, she dropped her book.

For half a minute, Julia Traynor looked at Yaz McKelvey with white, wide eyes, as she and he rode through the rustling, bustling Upper West Side winds. Yaz flew and dove and rose like a balletic bird, keeping a tight grip upon his passenger.

After the initial shock, Julia looked around and down and straight into Yaz's eyes.

"No wires," she said. Then she whooped with excitement, hugging Yaz tightly to her. The yells transformed to laughter and back to deep, gut-busting shouts. She began to speak, then thought better of it.

The next five minutes were for the birds, but Yaz and Julia enjoyed it much more than a bunch of ratty pigeons would have. Finally his arms began to tire and Yaz set them down on the roof of their apartment building, his initial launching pad.

For a long while they sat and grinned at each other.

"Yaz," Julia began after a long while, "how...?"

"I don't know," Yaz said, shaking his head.

There was more sitting and grinning and staring at each other. Yaz was totally involved with Julia's stare, until he finally realized that if there ever was a time to make his plea, this was it.

But even as he started speaking, he could see the wary, concerned look in Julia's eyes. She knew.

"Julia, I would really like to —"

"Yaz, I know. I've known for quite a while. But I don't want to. I just don't think of you that way."

Yaz felt his shoulders slump. This wasn't the way romance was supposed to go. This was too much like real life. Real life usually sucked, except for certain unusual exceptions here and there.

"Now — but — I can fly!" Lame as it was, it was the only response he could think of. It was time for a response that in its sheer depth of passion should have blown out with both barrels, instantly uniting them as partners of the soul. Instead, he mumbled out the obviously unusual, the unusually obvious. A double barreled squirt gun with a leaky handle of an answer was the best he could find in his arsenal.

"Yes," she answered, and for a second her grin was back. Then it was gone. "But you're still the same person."

Yaz jumped to his feet, and his momentum carried him a few inches into the air. "Is that so awful? Is that so bad?"

"No, it's really very good. You're a person I like a great deal. But I —"

"Don't tell me!" Yaz yelled. "You think of me like a brother!"

"Better than that. I don't really care for my brother."

Julia had been trying for humor, Yaz knew, but he wasn't ready for it. He yelled incoherently and levitated further into the air. He was an artist, not a writer. Words weren't his business.

They stared each other down then, he suspended above the roof, she sitting crosslegged, and they exchanged, not hostility, but anguish and anxiety for a minute. Then Yaz settled back down to the roof. "All right." He sighed. Then with a deep breath and a smile he thought would crack his jaw, he asked, "Would you like a ride down to your apartment?"

She laughed. "No, that's okay. I'll take the fire escape." And she did, quickly disappearing from sight.

Yaz lay down on the roof, and he stared at the pink night sky for a long while, muttering, "Harsh, harsh, harsh," to himself over and over. Then he started randomly cursing, though centering around the topic of his own idiocy.

His thoughts turned to the blank, white canvas waiting in his apartment. Blank, blank canvas. He had taken the jump, and the risk had turned out to be meaningless. Random defiance of gravity had robbed him of his risk; he had flown away from the problem, leaving it swirling behind him in his slipstream.

He sat and muttered to himself, berated himself for a while longer. "Loser, loser, loser." He realized how repetitive his railing against himself was, and the thought about words not being his business popped back into his head. Not a writer, an artist. "Not even that," he screamed.

Then, finally, a worthwhile thought occurred to him, niggling at first, then washing over his mind like the soothing comfort of a soft, caressing hand. Maybe he'd taken a risk after all. He hadn't threatened life and limb, maybe, but there were more painful things to break. Like a heart.

He stood up and walked over to the fire escape, eager to get to his easel. His rage had suddenly burned out, but he was left with an immense energy. He had a very clear idea of what he would paint, and his fingers ached to pick up his brushes.

Risks were for taking, he'd found out tonight. Maybe minds were for changing. And blank, white canvases were for filling.

Yaz McKelvey thought he would start with a portrait. He had a very specific female face in mind.

❧

MORGAN NOEL was born in 1969, "while Neil Armstrong was bopping his way back from the moon", and grew up in Hammond, Indiana, which is on the South Side of Chicago, so his development was ruled by losing Cubs' teams and feailing steel mills. He recently left Columbia University before graduating and is spending a lot of time writing. Noel comments that he appears to be following the route of Jack Kerouac, but that instead of driving around the country in a car, he has worked in downtown Chicago for a while and is now looking for work in the Michigan City and South Bend area.

ALAN GIANA lives in Connecticut and has done illustrations for *FANTASY Magazine* and other sf publications.

Be wise...

SUBSCRIBE

On Solid Ground

by Cindy K. Hughes

Janet Kramer

My daughter Tanya poked her head around the door of my office at the back of our house.

"Mama," she said, sucking on a finger.

"Yes, dear." It was time for a break, anyway.

"Gary 'n me went to Atlantis. For hours!" Her eyes were wide as she watched me, as if wondering if I were going to get angry.

I looked at my daughter. She was my only child, and I her only parent. Her bangs were brushed up in a tangle above her forehead. The forehead had a streak of dirt up into the hairline. Her bare feet and the bottoms of her jeans were wet and muddy: she'd been in the pond.

"How did you get there, love?" I asked calmly, reining in my worry. I tried to be a good parent and not shelter my child, but she was only five years old.

Tanya grinned and took her finger out of her mouth. "We teleported!" She giggled and ran to me. The words she picked up, having a mother who writes and reads odd fiction. Teleported. I asked her to tell me all about it. Then I would inquire into where her shoes were.

She snuggled up to me and played with the hem of her favorite red shirt. "Oh Mama, it was so fun! Gary was s'posed to play outside 'til his mama's done with the housework, so I said we could go to Atlantis, like in that story you read me." (I truly disliked *Dick and Jane.*) I stroked her hair back and got a tissue to clean off her forehead. "Go on," I said.

"So Gary says how do we get there? (I guess boys don't know much, do they, Mama?) Since the pond's water, and Atlantis is surrounded by water, we had to go through it. We held hands and walked into the pond (we had to go in just a little!) and then we teleported."

"Just like that?" I asked, snapping my fingers.

Tanya rolled her eyes. "Nooo! First we had to say the magic words." She sighed at me and shook her head.

"And what are the magic words?" For all that my parents had raised me "rationally", I've never been able to completely believe in anything...or to completely *disbelieve* in anything. I felt a tingle run down my back, like a drop of sweat.

Tanya looked at me in shock. "If I said them here, we'd go to some house place. Not Atlan-

tis." She cocked her head and looked up at me from the corner of one eye. "Don't you know, Mama?"

This was tricky ground. I wasn't raising my daughter rationally; I encouraged her to dream and pretend and believe in anything and everything. I wanted her to believe in magic for as long as possible. *I* wanted to believe. I casually shrugged. "I've forgotten."

"Oh. Well, I'll take you, if you want. Gary had to go home." She looked so sure, my little dark-haired elf, sitting on my knee in her damp and muddy clothes.

So I said, "But can grownups do this; can a grownup teleport to Atlantis, like a little girl?" It would give us both an easy out.

She seemed to consider it, "hmmming" while she thought.

"Dunno," she said. "Hafta ask, I guess. Be right back!" and she was off my lap and running out the door. I sat back and tried to brush some of the mud off my lap. Then a thought shot across my mind and I was up and running too. Tanya, alone at the pond. I guess I inherited some of my own mom's worry genes. But Tanya was a fast little bug, and she was out of the yard before I got to the back door. I ran across the yard toward the trees in back of us, the trees which hid the little pond from view, calling Tanya's name. No reply. My heart beat faster, from worry or fear or some unknown hope, I don't know. I ran through the trees, avoiding small bushes and holes. I thought I heard Tanya's voice once.

I reached the pond and thought I saw a flash of red, over the pond. Tanya wasn't there. The flash of red must have come from the far side of the pond, in the trees. She was leading me on a chase!

I slowed down enough to look into the pond, to make sure the worst hadn't happened, but there was nothing in the pond more than the usual turtles and goldfish. I ran around the pond and into the woods. I stopped there to listen for small light footsteps or girlish giggles, but I heard none. My heart began racing again. My five-year old was not a quiet child, especially when playing hide-and-seek.

"Tanya!" I yelled. "Tanya?" No answer. Gary's parents' house was only about fifty yards away, to my left, so I went there. Gary's mother, Jean, was sitting on her back porch with a cold drink, and Gary was playing cars on the deck beneath her chair. I waved at Jean.

"Hi," I called. "Seen Tanya? I think we're playing hide-and-seek, but I can't find her and I'm a little worried." I walked up to the porch and leaned on the rail. Gary was sitting up on his heels, interested, but Jean said, no, she hadn't seen Tanya.

"Maybe she went back to 'lantis," suggested Gary. I was shamefully proud that Tanya had a better grasp of language than Gary, and he three months older than she. I crouched down and looked at Gary. Jean turned in her chair to stare at her son.

"Well, Gary, she said something about doing that. Could you show me where the two of you went to get to Atlantis?" Treading the line here on child secrets, but I just couldn't get my heart to slow down.

"Atlantis?!" Jean yelped. "But that's..."

"A hard place to get to — right, Gary?" I said, glaring at Jean. I was so afraid that a show of disbelief would scare Gary into silence. I'd seen it happen with other kids.

"Yah," he said. "But I show you now." Jean looked at me and shrugged, then slid her feet into her sandals and the three of us walked back toward the trees. I was sweating; it was a very warm day.

Gary led us back to the pond, skirting much of the trees that I'd run through. He and Tanya had a short cut that really was shorter; Jean and I had a few problems with it. When we got to the pond, there was no sign of Tanya. Gary walked right into the middle of the pond (which came up to his knees), clean jeans and all, and proudly said, "Right here we leave!" Then he turned and smiled at us. Jean was mumbling something about clean clothes and murder.

I try not to be a worrying person. But before I'd had Tanya, I'd been terrified by all the stories about stolen and molested children, so I told myself that a little concern was reasonable. I was no longer thinking of the hopeful leap my heart made when Tanya had said she would take me to Atlantis with her. I just wanted to find her.

Jean had two children older than Gary, both in elementary school. She looked at my face — I was gnawing on my lower lip — and suggested that she take a look in at a couple of our other neighbors. Casual. She told me to go back home and fix some lemonade for us both. And for what other neighbors might show up in our non-search for my daughter, who would show up just in time for me to feel embarrassed about rousing the whole neighborhood. So back I went to the house and I actually did make some lemonade. I was stirring up the second pitcher when footsteps at the door made me turn and look.

It was Tanya. Holding the hand of someone. I didn't spill the lemonade. I didn't even cry. I said, "You're just in time for some lemonade." And then I looked up at the someone who was holding my daughter's hand. Then I almost spilled the lemonade.

The someone was a woman, a little shorter than my 5'8", and the most exotic woman I'd ever seen. She was dark-haired and dark-skinned and had deep green, almond-shaped eyes. She was not as slim as I am and she wore a long loose skirt and loose vest over a snug shirt. She smiled at me and said, "I met your little girl in our backyard." Her voice was cool and smooth. I was in love, just like that. She'd brought Tanya back to me. I wiped my hands on my jeans and pushed my hair back from my face.

"I'm Tanya's mother, Alison," I said, holding out my hand. She took my hand in her free hand and smiled at me.

"I'm Sophia. I'm pleased to meet you."

Then I was on my knees hugging Tanya. She looked all right, felt all right, smelled muddy but fine. She hugged me back tightly and kissed me.

"Thank you for bringing her back," I said, looking up at Sophia. "I'm afraid I was a bit worried. I wasn't sure where she was."

"Mama! I told you where I was going." Her stricken expression told me I'd done it: the "I don't really believe my child's fantasy" thing.

"Oh Tanya, I didn't mean..."

"But Tanya," said Sophia's cool and smooth voice. "She didn't know how to get there. She couldn't find you." Making a precise, definite difference. As if she knew Tanya's story, and believed it. I felt jealous because I couldn't.

"Right, baby," I said. "I couldn't find you." That satisfied her, then she asked for some lemonade. When I asked Sophia she said she would like some, too, so I poured two and a half glasses, with ice. And then I remembered Jean. I excused myself and went to the phone on the kitchen wall. Jean had just come home, on her way over to my house.

"It's okay, she's home," I said.

"Just like I told you, right?" said Jean.

"Right."

"Well, how about if we come over for lemonade in about an hour? Give you some time with your truant." I agreed, not telling her about Tanya's new friend. I thought it would sound too weird.

Sophia and Tanya were talking non-

stop when I got back. Rather, Tanya was talking and Sophia was listening, with an occasional "um hmmm" thrown in. Tanya turned to me excitedly when I returned to the table.

"It's okay for you to come, Mama," she said. "Sophia says it's okay for you to come to Atlantis with us."

I looked at Sophia, searching for some sign of "yes, but we adults know that this is all just fun", but I couldn't find any. The tingles in my back had returned and I felt out of breath. For an instant I thought that they were both humoring me. But I said okay, anytime, and Tanya bounced and clapped her hands. Lots of energy, that child. My not-quite-disbelief was still holding, if a bit shakily. I spent so many years thinking that I truly was crazy that I seldom care about sanity anymore. But stability in my environment has come to mean quite a lot to me and this whole thing was definitely tipping the ground on which I stood.

The three of us made small talk for a while, then Sophia said she had to go.

"Let's go, Mama," said my child. "She said you can visit!"

I didn't know what to say, but Sophia took care of that.

"Why don't you come over tomorrow?" she said. "I have some things to do this afternoon," she said apologetically, "but tomorrow around noon would be good. We can have lunch." Nice, but normal.

"If you could tell me how to get there," I began.

"Tanya knows the way," she said, with a smile. The ground began tipping again. Maybe I didn't disbelieve hard enough. I was sure my mother never had this problem.

"Fine," I said. I'd find out soon enough. "But I don't know that I want to walk out into the middle of the pond and get my pants soaked." I don't know why I said that, except that I've often tried to spoil my own fun. But it was all right.

"I've shown Tanya a new way," Sophia said. "It will keep her, and your, feet drier. Oh," she said, pulling something out of the pocket of her baggy vest. "You might want these." It was Tanya's damp red tennis shoes.

"Thank you," I said. Then Sophia got up and went out. She walked through our back yard and into the woods, then was gone. I felt tingles again.

"So," I said to Tanya. "You found this nice woman in Atlantis?"

"Oh yes. The teleport goes to her yard. She thought you might be worried since I was by myself. She has a little girl, too." Sophia hadn't mentioned that while we'd been talking, but she'd listened to Tanya very well.

"Did you get to play with her little girl?" I asked, leading Tanya back to the bathroom. Her feet were almost black. The jeans were black too. I started the bathwater and added some bubble bath.

"Oh yeah. Zoe is a lot of fun. She's almost my age." She held still while I took off her shirt, then she began talking again.

"Zoe's an only child too, Mama. Like me. And she's only got Sophia. Just like us." She leaned over to kiss my head while I was helping her out of her jeans (she was muddy clear up to her knees!) and instead bumped her chin hard on my forehead as I looked up; neither of us could say anything while we laughed and cried because it hurt but was so funny.

Then Tanya got into the tub, which turned black immediately, and started splashing around while I took her clothes to the washer. They'd need at least two washings. I hadn't gotten a chance to do more than put soap in the washer when I heard Tanya howling for me. I dropped the clothes and ran for the bathroom.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I expected to see blood everywhere.

Tanya looked up at me with her big brown eyes and said, "I forgot, there's something in my pocket. You can't wash it!"

I put my hands on my hips and stared down at her. "What is it, a rock?"

"No! It's something Zoe gave me. It's a toy."

"Okay. I'll get it and you can play with it after your bath." I went back to the washer. Life with Tanya was the solid ground I had stood upon for the past five years. Even when I was angry with her, the world was right.

I felt around in Tanya's pockets warily. I used to catch lizards when I was a child, but they didn't appeal to me anymore. When I found her toy, it wasn't a lizard. It looked something like a cross between a lizard and a bird. Actually, it looked like drawings I'd seen of an Archæopteryx. The artist had conceived of the creature as being iridescent green and having black-fringed blue wings. It felt cool, and each scale had been carved individually. The wings were soft and leathery. I would ask

Janet Kramer

Sophia where she got it: I wanted one, too. It seemed more expensive than I would be able to afford, though. Sophia couldn't know that Zoe had given it to Tanya — I'd have to return it to her tomorrow.

As I examined it, I noticed a small button on the toy's underside. I pressed it and sat the toy on the top of the washer, waiting to see it walk or hop. Slowly it shook. Then it stretched each leg, each wing, its tail, and its neck in turn. It sat up, blinked its golden eyes at me, opened its mouth, and let forth music. Whalesong and some stringed instrument I couldn't identify, I thought numbly. And it had a better sound quality than my stereo system. My world tipped and turned over completely. I began to believe that tomorrow might be magical.

❧

CINDY K. HUGHES lives in Seattle and makes her living writing — software manuals. (In case this doesn't sound professional, read the Pat Murphy interview elsewhere in this issue — both of these women hone their craft by writing nonfiction for audience who are not fantasy readers.) She says that Seattle's rainy weather encourages indoor activities such as reading, writing, and playing computer games. She has been reading fantasy all her life, and writing since she was seven years old and her father called up and read her first poem to every one of her aunts and uncles. "On Solid Ground" is her first published story.

JANET KRAMER lives in San Carlos, California, where she works as a graphics artist for Sun MicroSystems. She has been displaying artwork at science fiction conventions since 1979. She has done assorted computer animation projects and illustrated a game for LucasFilms.

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The Dragon's Heart

by John P. Buentello

This is the tale of the Dragon's Heart, and of the errant knight who came to steal it away, and how it proved to be more true than most human hearts could ever swear to be.

The dragon in question was known as Firemage, and his name was aptly given. Born in the fires that flowed below Mount Cressus, the dragon was seeded by the magic of that land's most powerful sorcerers. Hoping to calm the bellowing of their angry mountain, they instead gave birth to their land's most horrible plague.

Rising from his molten womb, Firemage was an awesome sight to behold. His skin, shining red and crusted with half-molten lava, coalesced into a sea of black scales in the coolness of the afternoon. When he spread his still-wet wings to lift himself from the lip of the volcano, he spanned half the distance between Mount Cressus and its sister peak. Golden eyes focused for the very first time, and the dragon's mouth opened wide to belch forth a flame that seared even the fire-toughened rock of the mountain.

Firemage's first flight over the valley below Mount Cressus was a memorable one. The villagers of Tarsco Bal came pouring from their homes to watch the huge smudge of black that blotted out the noonday sun. They went pouring back in again as they recognized the shape of an approaching dragon. Finally, they scattered deep into the woods as Firemage's flames came to lick and burn their houses.

The cries of agony and despair that rang from the valley that day gave witness to the frenzy of the dragon's hunger. His first meal was the ring of seven mages, who stood rooted mute and dumb at the sight of the dragon's spawning. Their mutual realization of how they had caused Firemage's birth was quickly followed by their mutual death between his jaws.

The taste of fresh human meat seared upon his palate, Firemage took to the clouds, washing his volcanic skin clean in the suspended rain before diving deep into the valley. The sun flashed off his shining black scales, making him seem a streak of dark lightning descending from the heavens.

Firemage's second meal consisted of the young men of the village, who came forth clad in armor and plate mail, axe and broadsword ringing out their defiance in the afternoon air. The dragon bellowed back upon them, splitting their ranks with a piercing cry that chased their courage from them.

The dragon dipped low across the valley floor, simultaneously charring and scooping fleeing men into the darkness of his jaws. When he lifted up again into the clouds it was with a full belly and a roar of triumph filling the air.

Firemage, being a mage-born creature, had been gifted with the wisdom of such power. He knew the true names of every creature that walked the earth, and the substance of every star in the heavens. The power of common knowledge, however, was still beyond him. Being only a few hours old, he became quickly acquainted with the sound of the human cry of pain. There was another sound, however, that began to puzzle him. The entire valley was filled with crying, screaming humans, and yet he had destroyed but half their number.

His belly temporarily sated, the dragon dropped from the sky to alight on a small hill near the burning village. Firemage's massive body smashed the hillock flatter than the far plains, and in the process plowed a man and his small child, who were attempting to flee, under half a ton of earth. The man's wife, a small but sturdy woman given to fits when even in the best of tempers, cried out now at the sight of her family's death.

Firemage finished settling himself upon the ground and turned to the woman. He squinted his golden eyes at her and spoke his first words. "Why do you cry, woman? I have not yet touched you with my talons, nor scorched you with my flame."

The woman dropped to her knees, slapping the burnt earth and squeezing tears from her eyes. "You killed my husband and child! You buried them but moments ago, and you ask why I cry?"

Firemage brought his great head closer

to the woman. Though he could hear her screaming just fine, he was intrigued by the unfathomable creature. "You yourself are unhurt."

"Unhurt!" The woman slapped the ground again, this time in anger. "Not hurt, you say. You take the ones I love from me and say I am unhurt by it. You truly are a wicked beast!"

"This is true," the dragon replied, "but that doesn't change the fact that you are unhurt. I can see no reason for your pain."

"Because you have no heart," the woman snarled. She rose, half mad with sorrow. She spat on the ground before the dragon and shook her fist at him.

"You kill the deepest part of my soul and being, and yet you can't see the reason for grief. You may have been born of fire and magic, foul beast, but you were born with no heart. You can't see where the pain comes from, just as you can't see into your own heart, because you have none!"

Firemage drew back at the venomous attack, dropping his great head to ponder the woman's words. The dragon's yellow eyes blazed briefly with a hidden fire, and he lifted a single talon to his chest. The horny claw flicked black scales into the air as the dragon drew an incision the span of a small ditch down the length of his breast. Steam bled and bubbled forth, followed by a fountain of blood that quickly evaporated in the superheated air.

Firemage watched silently as his lifeblood spilled from the newly-formed cavity. He spread the cut with a pair of talons, waited for the steam to blow clear, then plunged his hand deep into the bloody wound. Not a sound came from his lips. Only the bright flashing of his eyes showed he felt anything at all.

The dragon closed his eyes and gave a great wrench of his hand, tearing it free from the opening, coloring the sky crimson. When he opened his bloody claw a mass of blood and fire-red magma pulsed and writhed within it. Firemage watched the fluttering thing in his hand turn slowly from crimson to orange to gold as it cooled. When he turned it to the open air bits and pieces flaked off in clouds of ash, leaving another shape behind.

The dragon waited until the tear in his chest closed and healed, sealing itself with the magic that flowed through his veins. He closed his hand about the thing torn from the wound and stared down again at the woman.

"You see," he said, blowing a lance-thin flame of light that settled on the last of the dwellings still standing. "You were wrong, woman. I do indeed have a heart."

Then, with a great taloned finger, he crushed the screaming woman deep into the blackened soil.

The dragon's great hunger kept him feeding on the village for several days, but eventually his great belly swelled with satisfaction and he removed himself to roost on a great crag overlooking the eastern side of the now dormant mountain. He did not move from this place for a span of time. Those brave and foolish young men who dared to venture close enough to catch sight of him spoke of how he sat staring entranced at some unseen object lying within his half-enclosed grasp.

The valley people stayed well hidden in the lower woods long enough to be sure he would not move soon again. When the ashes of their old homes finally cooled and were blown upon the wind, they returned to rebuild their village. That they did not simply gather their survivors and escape to the other side of Mount Cressus was never an issue. As one village elder put it, "What if there were an even fiercer dragon waiting for them on the other side?"

Firemage, meanwhile, kept his silent post. He sat with his golden eyes fixed on his heart, never moving. The villagers soon came to see him as one with the rocky cliffs. Only when the sun died out on the western horizon did they raise their eyes to watch the twin moons that stared unblinking down at them.

The dragon's heart beat with molten fire for twenty long years, and then ceased altogether. At that moment the living statue that was Firemage moved once more, placing his altered heart into the woods above the cliffs. The dragon's heart unfolded itself from its long sleep, rising and stretching, casting off its old, hardened skin of stone. Beneath lay the body of a young and beautiful woman. She rose up on the tips of her toes, feeling the dragon's hot breath against her perfect skin. She shook flaxen hair that dropped in soft cascades about her shoulders.

"Who are you?" the dragon's heart asked. Her voice was as light and sweet as the dragon's was harsh and booming.

"I am the dragon, Firemage," the black dragon replied. And then he added, with a clear note of longing in his voice, "You are my heart, now called Farensa."

The dragon's heart blinked her golden eyes and studied the dragon. She stepped closer and laid a perfect hand upon a scale that threw back her reflection a hundred-fold. "Then I am yours," she added softly.

Firemage resumed his raids on the countryside that very night, taking entire herds of cattle, oxen, and horses, with an occasional villager thrown in to keep the locals on their toes. Mixed in with the growing legend of the fierce dragon's raids was a tale that grew to be extremely popular. It was told repeatedly at inns and around campfires while the night winds howled. The tale spoke of a maiden of immeasurable beauty, perfect in shape and detail, with eyes the color of the newborn moon.

The phantom lady was said to roam the forests of the upper reaches, where the angry mouth of Mount Cressus still fumed. Clad in a gown of brilliant white, with lotus petals intertwined within the tresses of her sun-colored hair, the maiden spent her days among the pines and redtree, singing to the birds with a voice that put the wind's lonesome song to shame. Never did she stray from her rocky home, for she was forever under the guard of the great dragon, Firemage. Many were the men who dreamed of freeing the maiden from her fierce captor.

Such a tale could never be kept bound to the small valley that gave it birth, and soon it made its way across the valley, through the plains, and beyond. It wasn't very long before strangers began appearing in the valley. They arrived few and far between at first, but soon it seemed a steady stream of them were pouring into the valley and toward the realm of the dark dragon.

Every conceivable kind of man rode among them. Knight and knave, young and old, proven in battle and fresh from the farm, they came to seek the source of the fabulous tale of the dragon's heart. Clad in armor and chainmail, breechcloth and steel, they wore the colors of a dozen different lands. Armed with mace and sword, spit and hackle, lance and bludgeon, their goal was the same: to free the fair maiden from the clutches of the dragon.

They were a brave lot, almost to the man. The first to go scaled the face of Mount Cressus with fire in his eyes and an even hotter courage burning in his heart. Neither kept Firemage from burning him to a dark smudge against the guano-speckled cliffs. The next few tried to reach the high forest under the cover of darkness. Firemage, who saw as well in the moonlight as he did in the noonday sun, plucked them up and devoured them slowly.

An entire army next tried to assault the dragon's domain. Firemage burned some, trampled others, swallowed enough to give even him a belly-ache, and allowed a few to reach the very edge of the forest, just to see what they would do. After giving them enough time to realize they'd reached their goal, he found each as they tried hiding among the trees, slicing them open from neck to crotch with his claws.

The supply of available rescuers exhausted, the dragon went back to his roost, watching the sun rise and fall over the mountain, and listening to the songs his heart sang from deep within the forest.

One day the rising sun cast a small shadow against the side of the mountain that had not been there the day before. The dragon lifted from his perch to soar down close to the cliff face. On his second flight past he saw the figure of a man scrambling nimbly up the mountainside, and snapped his jaws together in anticipation of a fresh meal. Drawing his wings close to him, Firemage dove toward his prey.

The man, a knight who flew no colors save the dirt on his breeches and the bright red stain on his sword, halted his climb in time to see the dragon dropping toward him. He rested his hand upon the hilt of his weapon but made no move to defend himself. When the dragon was close enough to cast the entire side of the cliff in shadow, the knight raised a gloved hand in greeting.

Firemage had intended to spit the man straight against the cliff wall, but at the sign of greeting made by the human he stopped, beating his great wings slowly back and forth to hover beyond the cliff face.

The man lowered himself to a sitting position on a slim outcropping of rock. He unsheathed his sword, which although pitted and scored still held a wicked edge, and laid it gently beside him. As the dragon watched, the man leaned back and rested his head within laced fingers.

"Well, dragon," the man said in a strong, clear voice, "what shall we do this day?"

Firemage drew closer, flexing the talons of his right claw. "I think, Sir Knight, that you will die this day."

The man, who was called Brun by his mother and even less by his father, smiled through a well-kept beard. "So I have been told by the villagers below. I, however, have not come to fight and die at your hand."

"That really isn't your choice," the dragon replied, but he held his place long enough to ask, "Why have you come?"

"To win the dragon's heart." Brun's eyes locked on the dragon's and kept them there. "To set her free."

"Free she is." Firemage's golden eyes pierced the man's soul, looking deep into its fabric. He almost smiled then, something he had never done before. "Free she will always be."

Brun nodded and stood, sheathing his sword. "Then we have no quarrel, do we?"

The dragon nodded and drew back from the cliff face once more. "No, we do not. Go and seek my heart then, among the trees by the great waterfall. But hear me, human," and volcanic fire blazed in Firemage's eyes. "Do not try to steal my heart away."

Brun watched the great body of the dragon rise and disappear among the cliff mists. He let out a long breath, which had been building within him since the dragon's approach, and began climbing again. Dragons being notoriously fickle creatures, he had no desire to test this one's word while hanging by his fingertips against the rock wall.

It took the rest of the day to reach the forest above the cliffs, and by the time Brun set foot on level ground again the sun was a bloated eye pierced on the broken lance of Mount Cressus. The crashing sound of falling water met his ears as he stepped through the thick underbrush, and the knight felt his throat clench tight with thirst as he moved toward it.

The waterfall was a huge one, boiling off the rocky ledges from the edge of Cressus's firepit. The water broke and shattered against a hundred hidden ledges as it cascaded down, enshrouding the pool below in a fine mist. Brun walked through a sea of floating rainbows cast by the dwindling sun and fell to his knees at the water's edge. Taking care to keep his blade dry, he plunged his face into the cool water.

Between the sounds of his own slurping, Brun heard the soft rush of grass as it was pushed aside from behind him. He raised slowly on one knee, freeing the hilt of his weapon, and turned suddenly on the sound. His blade, cast an even deeper red by the setting sun, was half out of its scabbard before he saw it was the maiden standing there.

The woman who stood before him paled even the most fantastic tales he'd heard of the dragon's heart. She was easily the most beautiful girl Brun had ever seen, and he had seen his share. She was more than that, however. She seemed almost a wraith as she moved toward him, and as she stepped through the tall grass it caught at her shift, causing it to cling to her body as she went. Brun felt a stirring within him that had little to do with rescuing a fair maiden.

"I have never seen a thing like you before," the woman said as she approached. She looked Brun over carefully, her gaze like a soft caress against his skin. "What are you?"

Brun could not keep the laughter within him, and it spilled forth to ring among the trees. "I see how your beauty has remained so perfect," he told her, taking her small and perfect hand in his. "You have never seen a man before."

"Are you a man?" the dragon's heart said.

Brun laughed again and dropped to the soft grass. He still held firmly to her, and pulled her to sit beside him. "Indeed, fair maiden. I am Brun. Such a man as you have never seen."

"Not entirely," Farensa said. She rolled to lie upon her stomach, and gazed at him. "I have seen bits and pieces. An arm or a leg left from my master's feeding."

A shudder went through the knight at the thought of his fellows serving to fill the dragon's gullet. He reached out and stroked the girl's cheek as tenderly as one such as he was able. "Such a foul creature shall never be your master. Not as long as I draw a breath upon this land."

Farensa laughed herself then, the sweet sound driving all dark thoughts from the warrior's mind. "He is my lord, now and forever. Do you not know I am the dragon's heart?"

"And does the dragon's heart have a name?"

The girl nodded. "I am called Farensa. A gift from Firemage."

"The lord of hellfire," Brun spat. His face clouded again, and he rose to stand above the maiden. "You should not live in a place where names are gifts from demons, never having seen any of your own kind. Let me take you from this place."

Farensa paid no heed to the latter part of his speech, but rose herself to lay a hand upon the knight. She ran her delicate fingers through his hair, touched his chest and stroked his arms. All the while Brun stood perfectly still, feeling his own fires burning.

"Are you of my own kind? Who calls you their heart?" she finally said.

Artwork by Vincent DiFate

Brun felt himself smile again. "You, fair one, if you will have me. But we must go now. Firemage will soon stir to full life, and then our game will come to a head. We may yet have a chance to be safe before then."

He led the girl away from the edge of the waterfall, quieting her questions as they threaded their way through the trees and back to the cliffs. Brun watched the sun close its bloodshot eye as they went. He mentally counted off each moment as the last of the day's light flickered out. The true lore of the dragon spoke of this moment between night and day, when all such creatures became dormant until the sky filled with stars. At best they had a half hour before Firemage began to stir.

The way back down the mountainside proved no less treacherous than the way up had been. Brun was slowed even more by the girl's awkward progress, and it took all of his patience to keep him from dragging her bodily behind him. She did not flinch at the sight of the craggy ledges they must descend, however, and Brun felt his admiration of her grow.

The night winds slapped fiercely at them as they sought out handholds on the slippery rocks. Brun made himself stop even when his heart was slamming wildly in his chest for escape. He listened to the sounds of the wind, and there finally came a sound he was hoping he would not hear this night.

The scratch of scales being pulled upon stone, drawing sparks; the stench of sulphur was one Brun knew well. He judged the dragon to be somewhere above them and to the east. He looked upward in time to catch the twin moons rising over the top of the mountain. Even from so far below he could see the anger that burned in the dragon's eyes.

A moment later Firemage screamed out that burning anger, a wail that sent a shudder through the mountain itself. Brun drew Farensa close to him, and smiled at the trembling he felt from her.

"Don't worry," he told her, smelling the sweetness of her skin. "There are ways to stop even a demon."

He maneuvered them toward a small bowl gouged in the side of the cliff wall and wedged the girl there. The wind blew her hair about her face, and in the growing moonlight Brun could see where the climb had ripped and muddied her shift. Even so, she was lovely enough to call his courage to him.

"Do not move from this place," he told her sternly. "If my battle with the dragon goes badly, you must make the descent on your own. Wait until daylight begins. Firemage will be helpless then."

"Why not wait until then yourself?" Farensa asked, reaching to pull him beside her. "Then you'll be safe, too."

Brun shook his head and bowed down to kiss her outstretched hand. "The demon will lay waste to the entire face of the mountain to find me. I have broken my word to him. I won't risk your life because of that." He reached down to grasp a leather pouch that hung from his jewel-encrusted belt. "Death will come for one of us tonight. It may well be that the dragon's life will be the one forfeit."

Farensa's eyes flashed yellow in the darkness. "Please, you mustn't risk it."

But Brun was already gone from that place, scrambling to gain a flat-enough ledge to be able to fight from. The wind tore at his back as he went, and on the breeze he caught the acid smell of dragonfire. He was pulling himself to a large shelf of rock when the darkness was suddenly sliced through by a lance of orange flame. Brun judged the source to be a hundred yards off to his left. With a grunt he hauled himself up and over onto the rocky ledge.

"Human!" Firemage's voice was the thundering roar of a storm yet to come. "You steal what I have forbidden you to take! Return my heart to me!"

Brun unsheathed his sword and raised it before him. He felt his skin crawl at the sound of the dragon's voice, but deep inside him another Brun had awakened, one who felt no fear in the face of death.

"Come then!" he bellowed out into the night, "and I will rip another from your chest!"

The scream that replied was just above and to his right. Brun threw himself flat on the rock shelf just as the whistle of talons gripping empty air screeched above him. There was a leathery flapping that blasted the rock clean, and then an agony of coursing fire as one of the dragon's claws scraped at his side.

Firemage twisted back upon the length of his own body in midair, seeking the knight below him. Brun scrambled from the path of the monster's claws and rolled to his feet, ignoring the burning pain in his side. He yelled and leaped to meet the approaching dragon. Something flashed

against the darkness of the dragon's belly scales, and then the warrior's wicked blade was sliding between the folds of flesh, drawing a puckered cut across the dragon's skin.

Firemage screamed in earnest now, and rose high enough into the air to slip the sword from his belly. As he rose he saw the human reach to draw his weapon over the open lip of a pouch he now carried in his hand. A bright liquid that stank of rotted fruit shifted within it, and the dragon screamed again as the poison from the knight's first attack met his bloodstream.

Brun wasted none of his opportunity. The last of the deadly potion he had carried from the lowlands he emptied across his blade, then reached for the small dagger at his belt. As he drew steel against steel, blending the poison, he chanted a warrior's prayer for victory.

Firemage's thoughts were along similar lines at the moment. What attention he could spare from the unnatural fire running through his veins he gave to the creature below. This man had come prepared to destroy him, something the dragon had never worried about before. Now he turned and dived, realizing he fought not only for his heart, but for his very life as well.

As he swept down toward the ledge, Firemage stretched his foreclaws outward. If he impaled the foul thing before he got close enough to risk exposing his huge body to that nasty blade, he might well end this thing quickly. He was already beginning to tire from the exertion of hanging in the air beyond the mountain wall. Soon he would be forced to find room to land to continue the fight.

Below him Brun waited. He didn't bolt or cower at the sight of those great spikes dropping toward him. He waited until they were bare inches from his face, and then, simply and without particular hurry, stepped aside.

The movement was so sudden and fluid that Firemage could not stop himself. He flew forward to strike the cliff wall, all the while trying to brake himself with his wings. The impact sent a spear of stone straight through into his ribs. He half fell and half slid down to the ledge, crying in agony.

Brun himself had not expected the dragon to be unable to stop. He'd hoped to gain a position behind the monster as it rose to avoid the rock wall. Instead he saw the great bulk of Firemage's body drop toward him, and then he saw nothing at all as a foreleg the size of a large redtree smashed him flat against the floor of the shelf. He was a knight, however, and even if his senses were temporarily denied him, his instincts were not. He drove the blade of his sword deep into the dragon's leg even as it did its best to crush him.

A red-streaked flame erupted from the dragon's mouth, and he spewed both flame and blood over the ledge of the cliff face. Somewhere deep inside him, the living fire that was Firemage's soul fought against the tide of the poison flooding him. He rose, summoning his last energies, and tried to claw his way back up the cliff toward his birth home.

Behind him, the forgotten knight moved slowly, gripping the place on his side where white bone and red flesh lay exposed. His sword lay shattered where the dragon had flung it from his leg. Brun reached to grip the dagger still in his belt and grinned through bloody teeth.

"It is not done yet, dragon."

"Brun, please stop!"

He felt a light hand from behind steady him, and turned to see the girl standing beside him. She wore the shocked expression of one who had just witnessed an immortal confrontation. "Don't worry. He is finished."

Brun stepped toward the dragon slowly. The dagger was steady in his hand. Before him the dark creature lay still against the rock wall, save for the labored heaving of its chest. The knight watched the rise and fall, noting the place where a long scar ran across the dragon's breast. "It will be a fitting place to end this," he said, raising the dagger.

A shout erupted from behind, and then Brun was moving again, this time away from the dragon. He felt himself gripped by gentle hands that no longer sought to steady him but to separate him from the cliff wall. He almost had time to turn and look in that lovely face once more before he fell.

Firemage was certain the girl never heard the human strike the cruel ledges below. Only his ears were sharp enough to hear the silent cry that rose from that place. He said nothing at all for a while, allowing the mage blood to work its miracles against the poison within him. Beside him Farensa knelt and sobbed bitterly.

"He was an extremely brave creature," the dragon said at last, after the wild beating of his heart had finally quieted. He reached out with a claw and gently raised the girl's face, staring into her golden eyes. "He might have bested me."

"He was going to hurt you," the girl said, wiping her eyes with the hem of her shift. "Why did he want to do that?"

Firemage smiled then, for the second time since his birthing. "Because he was who he was, and sought something he could never have."

"He didn't have to be so foolish," Farensa said. She rose and came to stand beside the dragon. Softly, she touched the place where Brun's sword had cut a deep gash in the dragon's leg. "That will have to be tended, and your ribs set to heal." She frowned again. "He was a brave man."

Firemage nodded, and his eyes dimmed but a little. "Yes," he sighed, "that he was."

The maiden nestled close to the great dragon and began to stroke the smooth scales along the place at his chest where the scar ran white. "But foolish, to think he could ever steal a dragon's heart away."

❧

JOHN P. BUENTELLO is currently teaching at a court reporting school in San Antonio Texas. He has a B.A. in English. He says, "I have been writing since my early teens, and along with my brother formed a lifelong infatuation with fantasy and science fiction. My writings have run the range from fantasy to horror to stories for children. I haven't yet found a niche I haven't liked. Fantasy seems to be homeground for me though, and I doubt if I'll ever tire of the landscape.

"I have published stories in *Dragon Magazine*, *Gorezone*, and a number of children's magazines. Currently there is a fantasy novel in the works, and an endless stream of stories yet in mind. I am ecstatically married to the most beautiful woman in the world, and have never been happier in my life."

VINCENT DIFATE won the Hugo for Best Professional Artist in 1979, and is best known for his futuristic, detailed drawings of spacesuits, rocketships, and other hardware. We fortunate readers of *FANTASY Magazine* get a chance to see another side of his masterful artistic talent.

Membership in ASFA, the Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Artists, the group which gives out the Chesley Awards, is open to anyone. It costs $18.00 a year, payable to ASFA, P.O. Box 151442, Arlington TX 76015-7442, and includes their (beautiful) quarterly newsletter.

Artwork by James Balkovek

And All Places...

by Anthony R. Lewis

Once, while walking between the worlds with her tail held high, Vashti saw a dragon. She paused to watch as he passed, the failing light of afternoon making a kaleidoscope of his scales. He stopped short upon seeing her, for she was large as he, perhaps, was small; sizes can be deceiving when dealing with one who walks between the worlds.

"My Lady Cat," he stammered, and a wisp of sooty smoke trickled from one nostril indicating his surprise (and such is considered somewhat rude amongst the better kind of dragons). She did not respond but sat in the road and began to wash her left forepaw, still regarding him with large yellow eyes tightly slitted.

The dragon looked back. Vashti's parents had both been large cobbies but an older ancestry had cropped out in her — she was Bast. But a Bast that was the rich golden red of a flame. Remembering his manners, the young dragon bowed to her.

Vashti stretched, shook herself, and said: "Come! We will walk together for a time in your world, and you will tell me of it and of yourself."

"Oh, yes, My Lady," and he hurried to catch up as she had already begun walking. "Um. I hight Peridot kraPorphyry, an it please Your Ladyship. I am from Keep Viggenhelm, and I am going on my adult quest."

She turned and flicked her ears, but the devil lights shone in her eyes. He stopped self-consciously, swallowed and continued, dropping out of the High Tongue in his youthful enthusiasm.

"This is the first time I've been away from home. I mean, I've been on trips with my family and..." He stopped again, uncertain of her mood, but plunged on. "I'm on my quest; I've got to rescue the princess from the ogre or I'll never be a knight and never get..." Again, blushing silence followed.

"Ah," she purred. This seemed to be the type of world she liked to visit. "Are you not rather young to be awarded such an hazardous task?" Not really a fair question to ask a young hopeful, but cats have always had special privileges. They continued on a mile or so in silence.

"I'm not really on my quest; at least, not my *official* quest," he admitted. "But what else could I do? Beryl's promised in marriage to the one who rescues her, and so I've got to be the one who saves her. You understand that, My Lady."

"Beryl?" and her whiskers twitched in silent amusement.

"Beryl hriChalcedony. That's her name. She's the most beautiful dragonne in the world. I met her at the Midsummer Festival and we fell in love." He ceased speaking, lost in a dream of naif love.

"And the ogre," Vashti prompted. "What is the ogre like?"

"Horrible!" His voice broke on the word. "He's got no scales nor fur nor feathers — just hair, and a splotchy, pasty skin, and two legs, and he hasn't any tail at all. He can speak but he usually makes terrifying noises. That's what everyone says who's seen him."

"Sounds like a man."

"A man? I may be young but I know that men aren't real; they're just in children's books. This is real; it's an ogre."

"My error." She smiled with a flick of her long, lean tail. She thought how the lack of a tail had distorted much of human society in the worlds that she knew.

"He's captured her and he's holding her for ransom and I've got to save her."

"Why not pay the ransom?" Cats always see what things are all about. That's why so many dogs and humans dislike them.

Peridot was shocked. "That's not honorable. I may not be an adult, but I do know that there are some things that decent dragons don't do. Even if her father would agree, she is too pure and noble to accept such a dishonorable action. Paying ransom to ogres — what an idea!"

Again her tail flicked from side to side. "Once again, my error. You must excuse me for I am not knowledgeable of the customs of your land."

"Oh, My Lady, I didn't mean to criticize you. Oh, this is so slow. If only I could fly as dragons were once said to be able to do."

They continued along the road. Peridot talked, for he was brave and young and full of that joy of youth that adult dragons are wise enough not to crush.

Vashti listened, for she was older and wiser, and said little, knowing much, for she walked between the worlds with her tail held high.

Eventually, they came upon a small inn and made sup there and prepared for the night. Peridot had taken the sword that he wore upon his back and sharpened and polished it. The morrow would find him facing the ogre.

"My father gave me this sword, My Lady, and my sisters set the stones in the hilt. See. That's a peridot — my namestone. Won't they be proud when I return having killed the ogre and rescued Beryl! Oh, we'll have a grand feast, and dancing, and pipers, and acrobats..."

Vashti took her leave of him till the morning for it was darkening towards night and there were things glimpsed in the neighborhood that a cat who walks between the worlds needs must look into. Peridot slept happily.

Morning, after breakfast, found them walking eastward into the sun, toward the ogre's cave.

"My Lady Cat," he began and then stopped. She regarded him and moved her ears forward. Then he said, "This will be dangerous, My Lady; as you are not a warrior *(for he was young, let it pass)* you should seek a place to rest today until I have dispatched this monster. Then we can return to the inn."

"And Beryl hriChalcedony also?" This with a cat's secret grin.

He smoked a bit, nervously playing with the belt that secured the scabbard on his broad back, and nodded. "We'll be married when we return to Keep Viggenhelm."

"Yes. I had thought as much. I am not so delicate as you believe me to be. But I always try to play by the rules of the game I am in. I will return to the inn and await you and Beryl there."

However, as soon as Peridot had passed from sight she plunged into the wood along the road and rapidly made her way to the ogre's cave. She followed the man-smell she had noticed for the last miles. Circling the hill and climbing it, she found a small ledge above the cave mouth.

There she sat and made herself small and unnoticeable after the manner of cats and especially of one who walks between the worlds. A few disjointed skeletons littered the clearing by the cave, adding to the general untidiness of the location. "Certain to be a man," she thought, and began to wash herself in a subconscious rejection of the scene and what it stood for. She did not fail to notice, however, that the skulls had been broken from behind. "Definitely a man," she repeated to herself.

Peridot arrived to a halt in front of the cave just as the sun had passed her zenith.

"Beast! Ogre! Do you yield up the Princess Beryl hriChalcedony unharmed or face my wrath. I, Peridot kraPorphyry, do this so proclaim!"

There was no response. Twice more he flung his challenge and twice more the words died in almost inaudible echoes.

He approached the cave cautiously and peered in. From behind a spur of rock outside the cave the ogre came cutting at Peridot with his scimitar. On the ledge Vashti tensed, sending her claws a half inch into the rock.

Artwork by James Balkovek

Blood spurted from Peridot's shoulder but dragons are tough. He whirled and struck at the blade, sending the ogre reeling back. Vashti saw that his wound was not deep but it must be hurting.

On and on into the afternoon the fight continued, swaying first one way and then the other. At last Peridot's sword broke the ogre's blade and the latter cried craven. Peridot halted his final blow.

"I promise, My Lord, I promise. I'll fetch the dragonne. She's not harmed, you'll see. Promise not to hurt me and I'll give you of my trove. A nice briding present," he leered. "Yes, yes, my oath. I've lots of nice things in the cave."

The man (for so it was) entered the cave followed by Peridot. Vashti was worried. Only a young, damnably honorable dragon would trust an enemy who had kidnapped a dragonne and attacked from the rear.

Vashti climbed down the rock face and entered the cave herself. Her yellow eyes opened wide. Further back she saw a young dragonne — Beryl, surely — hanging unconscious, chained to the wall. Peridot had run to the dragonne, and was bent over her. The man snatched up a club and struck the back of Peridot's skull, rendering him unconscious. He would have been dead had his empty scabbard not spread the blow.

Vashti watched, lips drawn back from her fangs, ears flat against her head, eyes tracking the man as her tail lashed the rock floor.

"And now to finish him off," the man muttered to himself. "Maybe he has some gold or jewels. Anyway, dragons are good eating."

Before he could make good his threats, Vashti sprang upon him, knocking him to the ground where he lay half-stunned.

"You would kill him," said the cat, "despite your promises."

"Cats can talk in this world!" He was more astonished than angry.

"Cats can talk in all worlds. Others can hear and understand only in some." Again: "You would have killed him?"

"Of course," said the man, beginning to believe he was gaining control of the situation. "It was necessary. You're a hunter. You understand such things. We can't be romantic idealists today. We must face reality."

Vashti looked up from her perch on his chest at the unconscious forms of Peridot and Beryl and turned her face back to the man. "Ah yes, reality. Well, I always try to play by the rules of the game I am in," she breathed softly, and with one shining move ripped out his throat.

Vashti felt that Peridot would handle the situation better alone when he came to. Fear of the ogre would keep others out of the cave long enough for them to be safe. She sat on the man's body and finished the distasteful task of cleaning her fur.

Then, stepping daintily down and looking neither to the left, right, nor behind her, Vashti held her tail high and continued to walk her way between the worlds. ❧

ANTHONY R. LEWIS, chairman of Noreascon in Boston in 1971 (the World SF Convention), technical writer and manager, mimeographer of the first issue of *Locus*, and would-be novelist, says that "And All Places..." is his first fiction sale since his "Request for Proposal" appeared in the December 1972 *Analog*.

He says he lives in an old house in Natick, Mass., "where I am kept under control by a twelve-year old daughter — Alice, a wife — Suford, and seven large orange cats — Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Latitude, Sand, Gobi, and Sahara."

Artwork by Lynne Taylor-Fahnestalk

Ghostdance

by J. A. Deveaux

Lightning shattered the twilight as Darian ran, revealing glimpses of the forest a few hundred yards ahead. Rain pelted hard against him. Thunder burst above him. He slid down a rocky incline and sprawled in the mud at the base of the slope. Standing up, he pulled his sodden cloak around him, and then ran toward Haunting Forest. At the woods' edge he hesitated, but the sound of a horn and the baying of hounds sent him plunging into the black trees.

Briars raked at his clothing as he pushed his way through the undergrowth, but the canopy of leaves above protected him from the worst of the storm. He crashed through a dense and unforgiving thornbush and spilled into a small clearing. Trying to catch his breath, he huddled next to a small outcropping of rocks. Darian started when he saw a pair of glowing eyes under a bush near the rocks. Lightning flashed, and he saw a bedraggled fox staring at him in terror.

"Heh. I know what it's like, believe me," Darian said, twisting his mouth into a lopsided grin. "Don't worry. It's not you they're after this time." He waved his arm and made a shooing sound. The fox stared at him for a moment, then bolted deeper into the forest. Darian envied the fox. Even now, it was probably making its way home to a warm den and mate.

Trembling in the cold rain, he scanned the trees for any sign of his pursuers. A figure, illuminated by a flicker of lightning, moved toward him and he choked. Leaping to his feet, he drew a dagger with a desperate cry. "Who's there?"

The lightning crackled through the darkness, revealing the figure moving toward him. As the lightning died, the figure continued to glow in a pale blue light. Darian shook his head. Squinting at the glowing form, he realized that it was a woman.

"Stay back!" He shouted, rasping voice cutting through his shallow breathing. The woman cocked her head at him and seemed to be speaking, but he could not hear her. Raising her glowing hand, she moved closer. As she came near, he swung his free hand at her in an attempt to knock her arm away. Darian froze in astonishment when his hand passed *through* her arm, not touching. She reached for his head.

"No!" he cried, backing away from her. Tripping, he fell to the ground with his useless dagger falling beside him. The woman knelt next to him as he lay shivering in the rain staring at her. The soft blue light surrounded her, and he spared a moment of fright to wonder at the rain falling through her. She was wearing an elegant court dress; long, curly blonde

hair floated cloud-like around her shoulders, and he thought her eyes were blue.

She reached for his head, and he covered his face with his arms. He felt a sharp cold brushing along his forehead, as if someone had rubbed ice along his brow, and then he heard her speak.

"You look a little wet." Her eyebrow arched critically as she examined him.

He pulled himself up onto his knees and stared at her. "What do you want from me?"

She smiled and said, "I can help you. There is shelter near here." She stood and moved toward the edge of the glade. He noticed that her feet did not touch the ground. She simply drifted in the air a little above the muddy forest floor. "Come. This way."

He drew himself to his feet, picked up his dagger, and sheathed it. "Why should I trust you?"

Looking at him with an impatient frown, she said, "If you do not get out of the storm, you will catch your death of cold. And then you may haunt the forest with me. Do as you wish." She turned and started to glide into the trees.

He hesitated, but then he heard the barking of dogs. It sounded closer, and he knew the decision was already made. Trudging along the ground behind her, he fought his way through the thorny underbrush.

"This way," she said, floating somewhat to the right of his current path and beckoning with a finger. "There are fewer thorns."

They continued through the forest, Darian slogging through the mud and brush, and the ghost floating easily along in the air in front of him. Soon they came to the edge of a rocky cliff overlooking a densely forested valley. The ghost looked at Darian, and pointed below them to the center of the valley. A flash of lightning revealed the outlines of a ruined castle.

He gazed down at the ruined keep, and then turned to speak to the ghost. "That must be Castle Argent. It's deserted. They say..." He stopped, suddenly unsure of what to say.

"Yes? What do they say?" Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

"They say it is haunted." He smiled, feeling foolish. Bowing slightly to her then, he gestured for her to lead the way.

Darian was sure he wouldn't have made it down the cliff alone. Without the ghost to show him handholds, he would have fallen to his death. As they made their way to the ruined keep, strokes of lightning illuminated the castle, making it seem more ominous to Darian. The portcullis to the keep was down, but a large wooden battering ram had kept it from closing completely. Wicked barbs protruded at each juncture of the portcullis. Darian crawled under the sharp iron spikes while the ghost simply floated through them.

Large stone steps, cracked and weathered, led up to a set of wooden doors hanging loose on their hinges. As soon as Darian entered, he saw a dark entrance hall leading to another set of doors. By one wall was a large wooden table turned on its side. Darian closed the doors and shoved the table in front of the entrance to form a simple barricade. Then they walked down the hallway and through the other set of doors.

The chamber they entered was once the great hall of the keep. It was fairly dark and dry, but they could still hear the thunder and wind outside the keep.

"May I light a fire here?" he asked.

The ghost nodded. Darian went to the fire pit at the far end of the hall and saw in the dim light that there was some old wood remaining. He removed a piece of flint from a pouch and struck it with a dagger, and worked at it for several minutes. Finally a spark caught. With his careful attention, a small fire soon blazed in the pit. The shadows in the room retreated to reveal a large dining chamber. Just opposite the fire pit, near the back wall, was a dais with two steps. A large stairway ran against the left side of the hall, going up into an undisclosed darkness. Several chairs and tables were overturned and scattered. The remains of tapestries hung torn on the walls; some puddled on the floor where broken plates and rusted cutlery helped old leaves litter the area.

Darian turned back the hood of his deep green cloak, and brushed long wet auburn hair away from amber eyes. Holding his hands out to the fire, he looked at his companion.

"This is better than the storm, is it not?" she asked, seeming to settle on a chair a few feet away from the fire.

"Yes, it is," he replied. "Thank you. I apologize if I seemed ungrateful before. I've never been offered aid from a ghost. My name is Darian."

"I am Crystla," said the ghost.

Darian leaned back against the dais steps. They sat quietly for a while, watching the flickering fire, and listening to the storm break against the abandoned castle. Every little while, Darian sneaked a glance at Crystla. She was staring hypnotically at the fire, lost in a memory perhaps. Finally, he cleared his throat and asked her, "How did you find me out there?"

"I was drawn by your fear. Its taste was very strong."

"Taste?"

"Yes," Crystla spoke with a glint in her eyes. "To an extent, a ghost can feed off of strong emotions. Fear is one of the strongest."

Darian stared at the fire, and then turned to look at her. He could not quite keep the quaver from his voice. "An emotional vampire then."

Crystla pondered the statement for a moment. "Similar perhaps. But such nourishment is not required for a ghost, whereas it would be for a vampire."

"Why did you decide to help me, then?" Darian wondered if she meant that vampires were real, but it seemed a foolish question to ask a ghost.

She laughed. "I was bored."

"Oh." Darian's face dropped. Unaccountably, he felt disappointed.

"Are you an outlaw?"

"Huh? No!" He started up indignantly, then settled back when he saw her grin. He was annoyed. She had gotten a rise out of him. "I'm a bard."

"Then what are you running from?"

Darian stared again at the fire. He wondered how wise it would be to tell her. Finally he said, "Duke Karras' men are hunting me."

"Why?"

"Karras was suspected of plotting against the King. The King sent me to Karras Keep to learn what I could and determine the truth of this tale. Duke Karras welcomed me in as he would any bard; he even invited me to sit at his high table and share news. He seemed particularly interested in hearing about the skirmishes in the Border Wars to the south. I stayed there for several days attempting to find some concrete evidence of the Duke's betrayal. I finally learned that he had received a N'zaeri emissary —"

Crystla made a snarling sound. Her eyes had narrowed in anger. The room grew dimmer and colder as he stared at her in bewilderment. He could feel the hatred in the room. "What —?"

"N'zaeri! They destroyed Argent. They destroyed my home."

"That was over two hundred years ago," Darian whispered.

Her eyes flashed as she looked at him. "I remember."

"I have heard the stories...the things they do to prisoners..."

"It was worse than you could imagine."

After a moment she shook herself and said seriously, "I am sorry. Please continue."

"Karras had received a N'zaeri witch named Azrea. I spied on them in a private chamber. They were plotting the assassination of the King and an invasion of N'zaeri troops. I had heard enough and was about to slip away from the door when a shadow fell across me. Without thinking I dived and rolled, and a N'zaeri blade swept by a hand's breadth above my head. A N'zaeri warrior had stolen up behind me. He howled at me, and I ran. I managed to make it out of Karras Keep before the alarm was raised, but I knew they were going to pursue me. I fled to Haunting Forest hoping that its evil reputation would force them to abandon their pursuit. I did not expect to find any live ghosts here, more likely just vicious wild animals."

"So, it happens again," Crystla said. "This treachery must be stopped."

"It will be...if I can get back to the King alive," Darian said. Then, a minute later, "What...happened here?"

She spoke slowly, carefully, as if remembering the event word by word. "It was during the Second Incursion. We were betrayed. They killed everyone they could find. Impaled many of my father's men...and the women...the things they did, even to the pregnant ones.... Then, as if that wasn't enough, a N'zaeri sorcerer condemned our souls to wander this plane without rest. Eternally." Darian regretted asking the question. He did not like seeing her relive such terrible memories.

They sat in silence then, staring at the fire. It crackled and slowly died down until it was little more than glowing embers. The shadows in the room slowly crawled toward the edge of the fire. Darian fed the fire again, but it did not regain its former brightness.

Finally, the ghost spoke. Her voice was quiet and sad. "Minstrel, will you play for me?"

Darian said nothing; instead, he fished a narrow wooden case out of a deep pocket in his cloak. He opened the case, withdrew a sparkling silver flute, and began to play. It was a sad tune, long and full of drawn-out sorrow. He knew he played it well, but he soon began to feel too depressed by it, so he changed it. The second tune was more light-hearted; the notes crept up one side of the scale and slid down the other. It seemed to tell a story. Before long Crystla was smiling again, and even the shadows seemed to perk up their ears to listen. Darian then moved on to a dancing melody.

The air stirred and shimmered about the bard and the ghost, and then it seemed to Darian that there were people dancing in the hall. He could only catch glimpses of them as he played — from the corner of his eye. Every now and then he thought he caught the sounds of laughter and joy.

"They haven't danced in so long!" Crystla whispered from close beside him. Darian continued to play while the ghosts of the castle danced, fading in and out of sight, and the great hall sparkled with music and magic. Suddenly Darian felt a tugging at his flute. It flew out of his hands, spun crazily for a moment, and then settled level in the air. Then it began to play. Darian watched in amazement as his flute bobbed along in the air playing a tune that he knew was centuries old. The ghosts continued their ethereal dance. It was an almost hypnotic sight, but soon Darian found himself looking at Crystla instead. There was joy there in her face, but wistfulness too. He stood and moved toward her.

"Will you share this dance with me?" Crystla looked up, and saw him smiling

Artwork by Lynne Taylor-Fahnestalk

and holding out his hand. Her breath caught for a moment, and it seemed there was a tear in her eye, then she nodded and took his hand. Darian was not sure what to expect. They were unable to actually touch, but there was enough physical sensation in the contact, like touching a cloud, that he felt he would be able to lead. They stood staring at each other, and then began to dance.

It took him a few moments to get used to her insubstantialness, but she followed him well, and they soon became comfortable with the feel of the dance. After a pirouette Crystla threw back her head and laughed. It seemed to Darian that the hall was changing. It grew bright with color and light until it became a glorious hall. Færie fire danced about the hall, darting between couples as they grew visible — dancing, laughing, and smiling. The air sparkled as the Færies flew, painting trails of color behind them. The hall spun around him and Crystla, but he did not grow dizzy. Darian didn't know if it was his imagination, or some magic of the hall, but this must be the way the hall was long ago, before its destruction.

A crash of splintering wood ripped through the hall. It came from the outer entrance-way.

The hall dimmed, as if a hood had been thrown over a blazing lantern. The Færies fled with their dazzling many-colored fires, and the ghosts fizzled out. Last of all, Darian's flute fell and clattered on the floor of the silent hall. The wind rushed through the great hall, almost snuffing the little fire, and Darian heard the barking of dogs outside the castle.

"They've found me!"

"Quickly, this way!" said Crystla, leading him to the stairs that vanished upward into the darkness. He started to run up the old stone stairs, with Crystla floating beside him.

"Stop!" she cried, and he froze, almost falling forward. "Look! The stairs are weak here. Your weight might collapse them."

He looked and saw the fractured steps he had almost trod on. The stairs were right above an arched alcove that led to the keep's kitchen, and there was no strong support to hold them up. Darian backed up a few steps and took a running leap over the weak portion of the stairs. They continued to the top, and then started across a balcony that lined the back part of the great hall. Just then, they heard noise at the door to the hall. Three armed men entered.

"N'zaeri," whispered Darian. The men were all large, heavily cloaked, and very wet. They approached the dying fire with drawn swords.

Suddenly, several chairs, broken plates, goblets, and cutlery began to hurl themselves at the guards. The guards tried to parry the objects with their swords, and one guard entered into a duel with a standing candelabra that struck an attack pose.

"What's going on?" Darian asked Crystla. He noticed that the glow around her had dimmed considerably, and she was hard to see.

"They are angered at having their dance interrupted."

The battle continued, and then a guard carrying torches entered the hall accompanying a noble and a woman. The man had brown hair, and a beard that partially covered a scar on his right cheek. He was dressed in rich furs. Darian frowned, recognizing Karras. The woman's face was narrow and exquisitely chiseled. High cheekbones, black eyes, and green hair gave her an alluring look. A heavy black cloak was loosely wrapped around her.

"That's Karras and Azrea," said Darian.

"What foolishness is this?" shouted Azrea. She raised a hand imperiously, drew a sign in the air which left a faintly glowing red trail, and spoke in a language that Darian did not understand. After a sharp gesture the attacking furniture and cutlery fell to the ground.

"Witch!" Crystla hissed.

"Did she kill them?" asked Darian.

"No. She has banished them. They will be some time making their way back here."

The N'zaeri guards spread out through the hall while Karras shouted instructions at them. One of the N'zaeri picked up something and presented it to Karras. Karras swore and threw the object aside. It clattered and rolled away, glinting silver.

"My flute!" Darian whispered in anguish.

"He's in here somewhere! Search every room," shouted Karras. "I want that bard found...and I want his head on a pike!" The guards took torches and split up to search the castle. Two went back to the entrance-way while Karras and Azrea went down a side passage from the hall. The other two guards started up the stairs. Darian drew his dagger, but then he saw Crystla floating to the head of the stairs. The guards noticed her about the same time she started shouting at them.

"Help! Help! He's up here! Save me!" she cried, reaching out to them with her arms.

Darian gasped as Crystla betrayed him, and he readied his dagger. The two N'zaeri looked at each other for a moment, and then went charging up the stairs. Their thundering feet struck the weakened steps partway up the staircase, and the steps shattered. The guards fell to the ground below. Darian looked over the edge. Neither guard was moving.

"I was worried for a moment," he confessed as Crystla came back to him.

She smiled. "They always fall for a maiden in distress," she said. "Come, we must hurry."

They crossed to the other side of the balcony and went down a side passage that led back into the keep. At a juncture in the hallway Crystla paused. "I am going to find out where Karras is. Go down this hall to the left. Don't take any of the side passages. At the end is a stairwell. Go to the top of the tower and wait for me there."

"All right, if you're sure."

She nodded. Then she disappeared.

Darian reached into the darkness where she had been a second ago, but there was nothing there. "But, without you, I can't see!" he protested. There was no response.

Darian turned left and continued slowly down the corridor, feeling his way. He came to a branching passage and saw a guard walking toward him with a torch. He tried to slip quickly past the opening, but the N'zaeri spotted him, and with a shout, gave chase. Darian ran blindly down the hall, and wondered when it would end. Then he tripped, catching himself on a sharp edge. He realized he had reached the stairs.

Slowly, he felt his way up the spiral staircase. Stopping at a landing he listened for followers. Then he heard footsteps and saw light coming up around the turn in the stairs. He crouched down to make himself a smaller target, and saw the N'zaeri coming up the stairs; a torch was held high in one hand, in the other, a sword. Darian readied his dagger.

As the light slowly ate Darian's hiding place, the N'zaeri was suddenly jerked upright in the air. He flailed in the air like a puppet, and then was thrown down the stairs. His scream did not last long, but the clanging of his body rolling down the steps seemed to last a very long time.

Darian turned and continued up the spiral staircase. Before he had reached the top Crystla joined him.

"What did you do to that N'zaeri?" he asked.

"What N'zaeri?"

"The one just down the stairs," he said in surprise. "He was yanked into the air and thrown down the steps."

"I did not do it. I was checking on the witch and Karras. They are coming this way."

He looked back down the staircase. "If not you, then who...?" he whispered. Shaking his head, he turned and followed her. They reached the top of the tower, and could hear the storm just beyond the closed wooden door.

"The storm will give you concealment," Crystla said, "and you may be able to escape this way. Across a battlement and on the other side of the keep is another tower. At its base is a passage leading out of the keep. You must climb across to the other side."

Darian pulled the door open; wind and rain howled into the tower. He pulled his cloak closer about him and stepped out onto wet stone. The tower was at the outer edge of the courtyard, and only a wall connected it to the main keep. He realized then the long hall he had run through was inside the wall. The other tower was connected directly to the flat roof on the far corner of the keep. Crystla motioned for him to cross over to it.

He started crawling across the length of the battlement with Crystla floating just in front of him. The top of the wall was wide, but very wet and slippery. And the wind was strong. Lightning shattered the sky at intervals, and thunder boomed in response. Rain struck him as he crawled toward the roof. Partway across, some stones gave way. Darian slid over the edge. Desperately he grabbed for a hold.

His hand latched onto a stone projection, and he gripped it tightly. Looking up he saw Crystla floating above him, encouraging him to climb back up. Darian started climbing. As he pulled himself up, he realized that he was staring into sharp teeth. He pulled his head away with a gasp. Then, looking back, he saw he was holding onto the head of a stone gargoyle.

"Nice gargoyle...don't...bite." he gasped as he began climbing again.

Straining, he pulled with his arms and slowly worked his way back up to the top of the battlement. Exhausted, he pulled himself back up on the ledge, and started forward again. He reached the other rooftop and crawled on to it, gasping. Then he heard a clapping sound coming from the far corner of the roof.

Looking up, he saw Karras and the witch stepping out of the tower doorway. "Very valiant," Karras sneered as he applauded. "You've led me a merry chase, bard." His eyes turned hard. "It ends now. Kill them," he said to the witch.

She raised her hands and started a chant. Her fingers began to glow, and then bolts of red fire shot toward Darian. Suddenly, Crystla was in front of him, and the fire went flying wayward.

"You shall not harm him, Witch!" she shouted. Crystla flew toward the witch with her arms out-raised. The witch stepped back in alarm and raised her hands to start another incantation. Karras moved away from the witch in fear. Lightning struck near the keep, bathing the two women in a brilliant white light.

Seeing Karras distracted, Darian leapt upon him with his dagger. Karras turned just in time to parry him with his sword, and the dagger went spinning out of Darian's hand. Darian dived to one side as Karras thrust at him. He crashed to the stone, and tried to roll away from Karras. The Duke raised his blade to strike again, but a bolt of lightning came crashing down behind him, throwing him off of his feet. The sword went flying to the stone. Darian lunged to take it. Karras lay on the roof shaking his head. Darian raised the sword high to strike.

A piercing scream cut through the noise of the storm. Darian whirled and saw Crystla and the witch surrounded by pulsing lightning. Azrea seemed to be controlling it, and Crystla was screaming in pain.

Abandoning Karras, Darian ran toward them, but could not get close because of the lightning flaring across the rooftop.

Taking careful aim, he threw the sword at the witch. It flew through the lightning cloud, gathering a glow around it as it went, and scored the witch on the arm. She screamed and dropped to her knees. Crystla flew at the witch, glowing brighter as she approached. Crystla's form began to shimmer, changing to something not quite human, and then she began to howl.

"Do not look at her! Close your eyes!" a voice said in Darian's ear. He whirled, but there was no one there. Taking the advice, he closed his eyes as Crystla continued to brighten. Her howl grew louder; it became a banshee's wail. Darian covered his ears and turned away from the sound, dropping to his knees. He could feel the forces building behind him.

Darian did not know how long he could last against the wail. Finally it died down and the light seemed to dim. Darian risked a quick look. Crystla was still glowing, dimmer now. Her form was human again, yet more than human. Her hair was glowed, her eyes flashed, and her hands held fire. She looked very beautiful now, and yet terrible too — standing over the crumpled witch with mystic fire in her hands.

The witch was slumped against a battlement. Darian peered at her and realized that her crumpled, brittle form was *old*. He could just make out the skull with bits of skin stretched taut, and a mass of stringy gray hair. Then a blinding flash of lightning struck the witch, burning away the crumpled form. The charred pile was smoldering slightly, but the rain quickly doused it.

Crystla floated down to Darian where he crouched. "Thank you," she said as she came close. Her fire was fading; she was becoming more human.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes." She looked around. "Did you kill Karras?"

"No," he said, and spun around. "He's gone. He must have run while I was helping you," he said as he turned back to her. "Let's get out of the storm." They went to the door in the tower at the corner of the roof and entered the keep. Soon, they arrived at the great hall where Darian rebuilt the fire. He huddled next to it for warmth. Crystla settled beside him.

"I guess we should look for Karras," he said.

"No. Rest. If he is still here, I won't let him near you." She looked sharply at his face then, and a strange expression moved across her face.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's..." she paused, then, "Nothing. A trick of the light. A shadow."

"Are you sure — Yah!" Darian sprung back. A shape was materializing beside Crystla.

"Oh, Father!" Crystla admonished the figure, "You shouldn't scare him like that!"

A man — a ghost — had appeared beside her. He had curly brown hair and a graying beard. Darian saw that he was dressed in armor, as if for battle, but he also noticed the white belt worn in the fashion of a knight, with an argent compass star, sword and quill supporting, engraved on the tip. A broadsword was sheathed at his side. The man was not very tall, but he possessed an aura of dignity that awed Darian. "My apologies," the ghost said with a slight smile and nod toward Darian.

"Darian, this is my father," Crystla said, "Duke Christopher of Argent."

Darian stood and bowed deeply to the ghost. "Your Grace...it is a pleasure to

meet you." As he straightened, he stared at the Duke again, remembering the voice. "It was you, wasn't it Your Grace? You warned me on the roof."

The Duke smiled again. "Yes. You were not meant to see what happened there."

"And on the stairs — that guard?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I wanted you to live to warn the King of Karras' treachery."

"I am in your debt, Your Grace."

"Yes. You are. And there is something I would ask of you," he said, scratching at his beard.

"Anything."

"Ha! Do not be so quick to promise. It may be more than you know."

"Still..."

"There will come a day when you may be able to help us. You will know when. But rest here now, leave tomorrow, and warn the King."

The Duke began to fade away. When he was almost gone Darian heard him say, "And thank you for the dance."

"You're welcome, Your Grace," Darian said with a bow, and almost fell.

"Careful. You'd better rest," said Crystla.

Darian collapsed next to the fire. He tried to stay awake a little longer, but his eyes closed of their own accord. The last thing he remembered seeing was Crystla's face, with the flickering flames of the fire in front of her.

Day broke clear the next morning. The sun was shining and the forest was alive with birds greeting the day. Darian walked out of the doors of the ruined keep, polishing the scuffs on his silver flute. The pale wisp of a ghost was floating beside him. She was harder to see in the daylight.

Darian and Crystla walked to the outer wall of the castle. Arriving at the portcullis, they stared at it in amazement. It had been raised about six feet, and Karras, impaled on barbs, was hanging ten feet above the ground.

"It appears I no longer have to worry about Karras," he said. "Your father seems to have thought of that too."

"Yes," she replied. "And you can warn your king."

After walking a ways into the forest, he stopped and looked at Crystla.

"Thank you for helping me. If not for you..."

"You are welcome," she said, smiling.

"This is good-bye then?"

"Yes, I guess it is."

He turned then and walked away through the forest. He stopped once, and waved back to where she still stood hovering. Then he continued on. Lifting the flute to his mouth, he began to play, knowing she could still hear the music.

Later that morning, Darian was trying to fight his way through a particularly harsh thornbush when he felt a presence close by. He smiled a little to himself and suddenly felt very happy. He turned and looked for her. She was floating a few yards away by an old oak tree.

"Well?" he said with a pretense of hardness. "What are you doing here? Bored already?"

"Hmm. Perhaps," she said with slight pout as she floated around him stuck in the middle of the thornbush.

"So why are you following me?" he asked.

"I think you need me," she smiled.

"What could I possibly need a ghost for?" he teased with a laugh, and thought how she had saved his life. "What would you do? Haunt my patrons while I'm entertaining them?"

She laughed. "Maybe! But just now you need me to get you out of this briar patch. Come," she motioned, "try over this way."

❧

J.A. Deveaux writes, "I am 23 and an undergraduate student at the University of Colorado in Boulder. I spent some time in Engineering and Physics before finally settling into English as my major. Then I decided that joining the League of Starving Artists as a writer would be GREAT FUN. Fortunately for me, MZB has made it possible for me to avoid the 'Starving' part for another month or two.

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Lynne Taylor-Fahnestalk and her husband, Steve Fahnestalk, were the 1991 recipients of the Canadian Aurora Award for artistic achievement in the field of speculative fiction. Her artwork has been published in a number of U.S. and British magazines. They live in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

For the last five years, she has been co-owner of Northwest Fine Art Press, which prints limited edition prints, in additon to being art directory for a printing firm and for two national outdoor magazines.

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Happily Ever After?

by Rocio Escobar-Blanco

Why do things like this always have to happen to *him* is what Matt wanted to know! First thing this morning his old lady announces that she's moving out. And the reason? She needs her own space. What the heck does that mean? Matt suspected she's been watching Oprah again.

And then the dog gets into a fight — and loses! Matt had to take Tok to the vet; there went another three hundred bucks! And man, now this...

He'd been running in the park when suddenly a man, a midget man, popped up in front of him. Matt tried to avoid slamming into him, but they ended up at the bottom of the hill, legs and arms all tangled up!

"Hey, buddy—" Matt spat as he eyed the little man head to toe. "Don't you know this is a one-way running track?" The midget wore a Nike running outfit, but he looked about as much like a runner as maybe Ronald Reagan.

"My name is not 'Hey, Buddy'. It is Norris Jaslow. And no, I did not know this was a one-way track, Mr. Salazar." This Norris guy spoke calmly as he eyed *Matt* head to toe. Matt was good-looking, with dark hair and a trim beard.

"Well, Mr. Jaslow, you do now — hey! I didn't tell you my name. Who are you?" said Matt with an accusing glance.

The little man stood up, straightened his outfit, and solemnly stated, "I am your fairy godfather, and I have come to help you find your princess."

Matt sat there speechless; mouth hanging open, hands clinging to the grass. "Oh man, why me? Look, buddy, I'm not gay. So I'm not interested in any fairy godfather, okay?"

The little man again spoke solemnly. "Mr. Salazar, as I have already mentioned, my name is Norris Jaslow, not Buddy. And the fact that you state you are unhappy proves that I am just in time to save you."

Matt stood up and picked at the dirt on his sweatpants. He knew L.A. was known for its flakes, but *this* was really wild. "Listen, Jaslow. I'm going to go now. I suggest you run back to the home and tell the nurses not to let you out without some supervision."

That said, Matt jogged off with not so much as a glance back. Later that night, after he cleaned out Tok's wounds and popped a TV dinner into the oven, his mind wandered back to the strange little man in the Nike outfit.

Fairy godfather — if that didn't beat all! Matt just wished that someone *could* find a princess for him. Being single was not all that hot, and living with airheads like Carol was not any better.

Matt had grown up in Texas, just outside Laredo. The Salazars were a big happy family. Always poor, but full of love. Matt had come to L.A. at age twenty — eight long years ago!

He'd come to make his fortune and instead ended up managing a tiny bookstore in the heart of downtown. Most of his customers just bought dirty magazines. A few of the older ones actually bought some books.

Matt had a nice one-bedroom in one of the city's oldest apartment buildings, itself great-looking. In fact it looked just like an urban castle.

BING! The timer on the oven warned him that if he didn't want his dinner charbroiled he'd better stop thinking and go eat.

"Mr. Salazar, do you mind allowing me a few minutes of your time?" asked Mr. Jaslow.

"How did you get in here?" Matt's heart was in his throat.

"I told you. I am your fairy godfather. I do have...magical powers." Mr. Jaslow spoke with a smile as Matt gazed at his sparkling blue eyes.

"Oh man, why *me?* Listen, you better get out of here before I have my dog attack you," Matt threatened.

"TOK! TOK!" shouted the little man. Tok trotted in and proceeded to wag his tail and lick Jaslow's hand. "This kind animal will not attack me."

"Okay, okay. I've heard loonies have a way with animals. I'll give you your few minutes if you promise to leave," offered Matt.

Norris Jaslow simply smiled. "After you hear me out, you won't want me to go."

Matt picked at his TV dinner. "So Norris, you really expect me to believe that you come from some enchanted forest, that you're six thousand years old and you're my fairy godfather — come on!"

"Where do you wish to go?" asked Norris.

Matt stared again at the little man's sparkling eyes. "Never mind. What I mean is, can you prove it?"

"Oh, you mean like hocus pocus?" The little man laughed.

Matt nodded vaguely.

"Okay, you asked for it." Norris stood up and waved his arms high in the air. "Pziz, spiz, web, bew, ufh, hfu!"

A light show began that was better than any rock concert. Yellow streaks flew around the room, blue zig-zags went from ceiling to floor. Green dots flashed on and off, and pink swirls hugged the furniture. Matt believed; at that moment, he believed!

The next day at the bookstore, Matt was polite and sincere to every woman customer. The reason? Norris said that the princess would walk into the store and that it was up to him to charm her. Jaslow had also said the princess may or may not *look* like a princess.

Just then a lovely blonde woman with a beautiful smile walked in. "Can I help you?" Matt said in a deep voice.

She grinned. "Do you have a pay phone?"

"No. Sorry." Matt shook his head and watched her walk out.

After a few minutes he was lost in a daze, dusting the same spot on the counter over and over, oblivious to the old men with their dirty magazines. He didn't even notice the brunette stroll in and go directly to the fiction section.

A bit later she came up to the counter with two books.

"Hello."

"Mmm? Oh, hi! Uh — will this be all?" Matt smiled and took the books.

"Yes, thank you," she replied.

Matt rang them up as slowly as possible so he could talk to her. "Steinbeck, what a great writer, eh?" he dimly said in a smooth tone.

"Yes," she agreed happily with a wide grin. "I've read these and now I want to see if my little sister might like them."

Matt smiled. "What's your name?"

"Silvia Rosales. And you are...?" she inquired.

"Matt Salazar. At your service, Silvia. Would you like to have coffee with me?" he suggested boldly.

Silvia grinned, "No, thanks. I'm on my lunch break and I have to hurry back."

Matt bagged her books and handed them to her. Silvia paid and left. "See ya," she said.

Matt changed his clothes and ran home. Tok looked a lot better.

"Hey, Tokie! Just let me wash up and I'll clean your wounds." The hot water felt great on his neck. He hadn't felt this much stress in a long time.

He must really be crazy! He actually was believing this midget dude. Jaslow was probably out somewhere having a good laugh.

"No, Mr. Salazar. I'm right here sitting on your sink," Jaslow giggled.

Artwork by Laura Brodian Freas

Matt dropped his soap and pulled open the curtain. "How do you do that?!" he yelped.

"Oh, Mr. Salazar," groaned Norris. "I'm disappointed in you. I thought we had gone over all of that last night."

"Yeah, but that was before I made a complete fool of myself today. You should have seen me, acting like a school boy!" complained Matt as he dried himself off.

The little man watched the toilet flush.

"We have nothing like this in the enchanted forest," he said in an oppressed voice.

"I bet. Listen, women pop in and out of the bookstore all the time. I can't make passes at all of them." Matt looked and sounded exhausted.

"Mr. Salazar, you will know when it is the princess," said Jaslow in a solemn tone. "No, not by looks, but by the *feeling*. You will know."

"Yeah, but..." Matt turned to look at Jaslow and was confronted by thin air.

Matt cleaned Tok and cooked himself a little bit of ham and potatoes. What Jaslow said did make sense. When he liked a person, it was the feeling not the *looks* that made his pulse quicken.

Had anyone today made him feel that way? It was hard to remember, he'd been so nervous all day. Yes. One woman *had* made him feel that way — Silvia Rosales.

Two weeks passed and Matt was sick of smiling so much. Now he was sure that the princess was Silvia. All this time and his pulse hadn't gone up once. But Silvia hadn't come in again since that day.

He had blown it, his one chance at happiness and he'd blown it by asking her out for coffee! *How romantic, Matt. No wonder you're single,* he mumbled to himself.

"Hello. Mr. Salazar, right?" said a sweet voice. Matt looked up from his dazed self pity to see Silvia's smiling face.

"Yes. Silvia Rosales! How did your sister like the books?" he replied loudly.

Silvia laughed. "She loved them. I'm here to get more."

Matt walked with Silvia to the fiction section. *Don't be an idiot this time, Matt,* he thought over and over.

"Would you like to have a bite and talk some more about books?" he suggested. The minute that it came out of his mouth, Matt wanted to reach out and pull the words back in.

"Okay. Today is my day off and I'm really hungry," replied Silvia. She picked out some more books.

Matt rang them up and told his assistant manager to watch the store. He grabbed his jacket and strolled out the door on cloud nine!

At the coffee shop, Matt and Silvia ate and talked. "So your parents are from Mexico, too! Me, I grew up in Texas," Matt said softly. "L.A. is nice, but now I only see the family at Christmas."

Silvia touched his hand. "I can't imagine living far from my family. We live near here. Me, my sister Elda, and my mother Amanda," she whispered back. "I love them dearly."

"What happened to your father? Or should I not ask?"

Silvia took a sip of her cola. "No, it's okay. My father was a drinker. He was so nice to us, but only if he was sober. When he was drunk, he was meaner than a rabid dog, but only verbally. Sometimes I think that's worse than hitting. Anyway, he went out one night — to get more booze — and got shot dead by a robber." Her voice trembled.

Matt took her hand and held it. The rest of lunch was quiet.

"Jaslow, I think I found the princess today," Matt said in awe. "Her name is Silvia Rosales."

The little man rubbed his chin.

"Well, it's not Cinderella! But close enough. When are you going to tell her that you intend to marry her and live in the enchanted forest?"

Matt shook his head. "Jaslow, this is America in the 1990s! You don't just tell a woman what to do. Hopefully she'll fall in love with me and then I'll *ask* her to marry me!"

The little man continued rubbing his chin, "Okay, do it your way. But I think the old way was better."

Silvia was in the kitchen crying, but not because she was sad. On the contrary, she was glad. It was these stupid onions making her cry.

"Silvia, I can't believe you had lunch with a strange man. *Hija, he* could have hurt you!" exclaimed Amanda.

"Oh, Mom, I'd met him before. I know where he works! And anyway, he's not strange," Silvia said between tears. "He's the most sincere guy I've met in a long time."

"You always say that and they always turn out to be jerks. Remember Paul?"

Boy, did Silvia remember Paul. He had seemed very nice at first. Later, they found out that he was wanted for murder in Florida. But as silly as it sounded, Silvia knew she'd find her prince.

Matt dropped the bomb three months later. He and Silvia were at the Santa Monica Pier when Matt told her, "You know, what I'm about to tell you is going to sound crazy but please listen." Silvia looked at him sweetly, so Matt continued. "I love you, Silvia — you are my princess and if you'll have me...Well, I'd love to marry you and take you to the enchanted forest."

Silvia hugged him. "Oh, Matt. I'd love to marry you. And what you said about me being your princess, that's exactly what I love the most about you! You're so romantic, but calling L.A. the enchanted forest, even I think that's stretching it."

Matt's stomach dropped. This was exactly what he didn't want to face. "I wasn't referring to L.A., I meant *the* enchanted forest. You see, I was running in the park one day and my fairy godfather came to me. He said I'd meet my princess and then he'd take us away." He lamely spit out the words.

Silvia's face wrinkled up as she started to cry, "Matt, you're crazy. Oh my God, I love you and you're crazy. I have to go now..."

Matt reached for her arm. "No, leave me alone. *Goodbye*, Matt." Silvia ran off and left Matt holding the cotton candy.

"So, she didn't believe you? That's the problem these days. No wonder most of the fairies have retired. People just don't want to believe," Jaslow said sadly.

Matt nodded yes and absently petted Tok. "I knew she wouldn't. That's why I waited so long. I didn't want to lose her," he moaned.

Norris Jaslow popped a smoky drink out of Tok's ear and said, "You haven't lost her yet. Go to her work tomorrow and ask her to lunch. I'll be there, and just as with you — I'll prove it to her. You humans are so easy to please. A few swirling lights and suddenly — you believe!"

Silvia told her family about the day's events. "Silvia, poor baby," said Amanda. "But he seemed so nice. He was always a gentleman." Elda popped her gum and teased, "Always end up turning into jerks though, don't they?"

Silvia dabbed her eyes. "I still think Matt's okay. I'll go see him tomorrow. I'm sure he can explain himself."

At the office, Silvia typed and thought about Matt. He had been pulling her leg and she had overreacted, that was all.

"Hi, Silvia," said Matt with a wide grin. "Wait — before you say anything — come to lunch with me and let me explain."

Silvia looked into his brown eyes, saw the man she loved, and went with him.

Norris explained his duty to Silvia and she in turn looked at both of them as if they were *loco*.

"Jaslow, put on the magic," Matt practically begged.

"Yes, perhaps now is the right time. Zip, piz, ohh, hho, dod, dod, poc, cop," Jaslow whispered. The other people in the café froze as silver specks showered down on them and orange arrows flew around the room. Tiny blue lights encircled Silvia, and little squares danced on Matt's head.

"Mr. Jaslow, this is beautiful. I believe! I can't believe that I believe in a fairy, but I do!" Silvia gleefully exclaimed.

"Then you'll marry me and go to the enchanted forest to live?" Matt asked after Jaslow returned life to normal.

"What about my family? I can't leave them forever." She picked at her food.

"Well, how about it, Jaslow? Can they come with us? And my family, too! That would be exactly what I've always wanted," mused Matt.

Norris Jaslow smiled. "Since this is my final assignment, why not? We need more happiness in the enchanted forest. What with all the other fairies retired, we haven't had newcomers since that Cinderella girl."

EPILOGUE

While it took quite a few more light shows to convince everyone, finally all were ready to take the trip.

Norris Jaslow chanted, and suddenly the two families, including Tok, were enveloped by a beautiful white mist. Some reports were later called in to the police by runners who swore that they had seen a crowd of people in a fog suddenly disappear.

They appeared in a meadow. Matt rubbed his eyes, but still couldn't believe the beauty that lay before him.

Yes, this was the enchanted forest and Silvia was his princess and yes, they would live happily ever after! And there weren't really any more dragons left, right?

❧

Rocio Escobar-Blanco was born in San Salvador, El Salvador, and moved (with her family) to Los Angeles while she was still an infant.

Having two older brothers who were fantasy/sf addicts (and a mother who sold a script to Ray Bradbury), she grew up reading Heinlein and other fantasy and sf authors. Her writing credits include *Starsong*, *Severed Tales*, *Hispanic*, and *Thirteen*.

Artist Laura Brodian Freas, Ph.D., is Kelly Freas's wife and Executive Director of his studio, and a Regency dance fan.

Artwork by Janet Kramer

Deliah

by John S. Manor

Deliah Berens closed her thick, dog-eared paperback and gazed out the window to the right of her desk. She watched the raindrops speckle the glass, merge and slide together down the slick surface. The unrelieved harsh grays and browns of the concrete building outside did little to lift her sodden spirits. The skyscrapers of the city were a stark contrast to the vistas of rolling grassy hills, storming oceans and bright, clear skies of Helevar, the city where Phalerin, the heroine of her book, lived. The talk of heroism and chivalry on the part of the warrior-queen and her knights had transported Deliah. She was sad to find that, when it ended, she was back in her own real world and not in Helevar.

Deliah turned her gaze to the potted plant on her windowsill. She had found it last night as she walked home, cast off into a garbage pail by some former owner. It was a rose bush of some kind. It had a sickly pink bloom and a couple of buds in amongst its many thorns. It had looked so forlorn she felt sorry for it and picked it up. She had hoped it would cheer up her office. But try as it may it only succeeded in looking more forlorn and lost against the backdrop of the city. "Oh, if only it were all real," she said to the plant. "If only somehow Helevar could come to life. I'd shuck it all and live in the queen's castle, even if I were only a maid. If only I could be a small part of her world instead of a 28-year-old receiving clerk." There would be no subway commuting to and from work, no leering boys gathering at her street corner to drink and smoke and curse. And no Henry. Her husband just would not fit in. He thought the books she read were, at best, for weak-minded escapists. Football and war, now there were two real topics for a book. Not make-believe queens and knights that killed fiendish ogres and trolls. No, Henry would not fit in. If Helevar were real. She sighed and looked up at the clock on the wall of her tiny office. Ten to five, almost time to go home. And it was Friday; Henry was picking her up for dinner at some place with a big-screen TV. There was a big basketball game tonight he didn't want to miss. "Why not kill two birds with one stone?" he had said. Why not indeed. She had wished for a heavy stone right then but, lacking one, she had agreed rather than watch him sulk all through dinner. At least maybe they could talk during halftime.

Deliah sighed again as she got up and put on her raincoat and wide-brimmed

hat. She put the book away in the drawer of her desk. Maybe she would read it over again.

Deliah looked down at the street from her window. "Well, Henry," she said, "you better be down there waiting for me this time. I'm hungry and I don't feel like walking." She thought of the group of boys on her corner who had yelled suggestions at her the last few days. When she told Henry he had just shrugged and said, "Kids, they've got no brains these days," as he turned on the TV and tuned into his sports program. He used to love to gaze instead into her hazel eyes for hours. There had been days when they were newlyweds when he would have walked her home all the way from the office. Now he wouldn't get out of his TV chair if the house was burning. Still, they had a dinner date, and tonight she wouldn't have to face those hoodlums on her corner.

The phone on her desk rang. Deliah had a terrible feeling of foreboding as she pushed aside stacks of papers. She finally excavated the phone by pulling on the cord. She picked it up and said, "Hello?"

"Dear, I'm really sorry," Henry's voice was saying over the static-filled line. The connection on the line had been poor ever since she had brought the dying plant into her office. She wondered vaguely if plants gave off magnetic fields or something.

"Henry?" Deliah said again, surprised. "Where are you? You're downstairs, aren't you? You're supposed to pick me up at five after five."

"I'm sorry," Henry's voice said. "I really am. I just had a real bad day. Now the car's acting up again. Carburetor, I think. I'm still uptown at my office. It looks like B.J. Crummington the Third himself is calling another late Friday meeting. I have to go to the meeting. You understand, don't you?"

"Perfectly," Deliah said through gritted teeth. "Just like always. Same old thing. You'll have to miss 'the game' but 'work comes first'."

"I knew you would understand," Henry said, sounding relieved. "Listen, I'll make it up to you. Somehow. I promise."

Deliah hung up the phone and looked out the window at the dark sky. It would be a long, wet trip home. She brushed back her straight black hair. Frowning, she pushed some work papers into her shoulder bag. Might as well get some work done at home over a TV dinner, she thought. Before turning out the light she looked once more around the office to see if she was forgetting anything. The plant on the ledge caught her eye. On an impulse she took it off the shelf. As she passed her desk she opened the drawer, took out her book and stuffed it in her coat pocket. When Henry did finally get home he would find her with her nose firmly in her book for the whole weekend. She would have her revenge that way. She turned off the light and closed her office door behind her with a final bang.

The city was swamped by the rain. Her usual subway wasn't running so she had to make a detour. She held the plant under her arm as she walked an extra five blocks to the next station that could connect her to a train going home. Lightning crackled in the night sky; thunder boomed off the canyon walls of the skyscrapers. The rain came down in great twisting, wind-blown sheets, so she took shelter under the awning in front of a delicatessen. The wind blew the rain under the awning. Deliah backed away from the edge and into the door.

A bell that hung on the door jingled as she entered the store. Her coat dripped all over the worn and cracked white tiles of the floor. A man and a woman in raincoats as wet as hers studied the merchandise in the cookie and bread aisle purposefully. She wasn't the only one swept in here by the storm, then. The deli's owner, a gray-haired man in a long-sleeved white shirt and long apron, looked at her over his glasses. "Some storm we're having tonight," he said with a grin. "Good for business."

"It's just awful," Deliah answered, smiling weakly. "I was supposed to be picked up, but my ride couldn't make it. Now this."

"At least the rain will do your plant some good," he said, gesturing at the potted plant in her hands. Deliah looked down at the rose bush. Like her, it was saturated. The pink petals were drooping and some of the buds had fallen off.

"Poor thing," she said under her breath.

"You're welcome to stay in here till the storm's passed," the owner said. "The coffee's good and hot."

Deliah smiled again and dutifully picked up a pack of gum from the rack near the register and placed it on the counter. "Maybe I'll look around while I wait," she said. She walked down to the refrigerators in the back of the deli and toyed with the idea of buying a quart of chocolate pecan ice cream just for herself. She decided it was a good idea to put the container on the counter next to the gum. She looked out the wide front window past the glowing neon beer signs. The rain was coming down harder than ever. She sighed. The subway was another three blocks, and in this neighborhood at this time of night they were long blocks. She put her hand into her pocket and felt her book still there. She took it out and looked at the cover. Helevar's green hills rolled out once more before her. Phalerin rode proudly on her horse Nightwind's back. She carried a lance with a red pennant waving from its tip. Deliah opened the book and read the first page again. The queen was disturbed by reports of an army of black devils massing on her borders. Of all her enemies, only the black devils from the dark caverns beneath Helevar struck fear into her heart. She called Maginn, her court wizard, to ask his advice. Maginn gave her a spell to use should she ever find she needed courage. Deliah looked again out the window and frowned. She would never get home this way, and she was so tired. She looked down at the page in her book and tried not to cry. Without thinking she whispered the spell written there.

Merry is the maid who marries wealth
Happy is the man who has his health
Should time steal all and sorrow provoke
The tears of a poor woman
Shall this spell invoke.

A lone tear dropped on the page, hitting the word "invoke". Deliah quickly brushed her eyes and, angry at herself for being such a child, shoved the book back in her pocket.

"You say something, miss?" the owner asked.

"No, I was just thinking aloud," she answered. "I'll take those, thank you," she said, pointing at the gum and ice cream.

As she turned to go out the door, she saw that the rain had nearly stopped. She walked a half of a block and the rain stopped entirely. Deliah could not help grinning and thinking to herself that she should have tried the spell a long time ago.

The subway station wasn't as crowded as Deliah had expected it to be with all the problems the trains were having because of the rain. She waited on the platform for her train. Twenty or so people in raincoats and business suits, carrying attaché cases or shoulder bags, waited with her. Everything would be fine now, she thought, though she wasn't too sure where the thought came from. Then she heard someone shouting down at the

Artwork by Janet Kramer

end of the platform to her left. The shouting came closer.

Four young men were pushing their way through the crowd, yelling at people and being rowdy. Deliah tried to edge over behind one tall man in a dark business suit who read his paper oblivious to the commotion. She hugged the plant to her and hoped they would pass on quickly. One of the boys grabbed the man's paper and threw it on the tracks while another pushed him into the wall. A third reached into his pocket and grabbed his wallet. The man hit his head against the wall and slid to the ground. Deliah watched in horror. The fourth boy, tall and skinny with a puckered scar on his right cheek, his mouth pulled back in a snarl, grabbed at Deliah's plant. A thorn pricked his hand and he fell to the ground screaming in pain. One of the others shouted, "Hey, she got Big Dave! Get her!"

They charged at her and all Deliah could think to do was hold up the plant. She closed her eyes and the last line of the spell from the book flew through her mind unbidden. A loud screeching cut through the air.

When she reopened her eyes she was shocked to see the young men sprawled on the platform. They each looked as if they had been pricked over and over again, a hundred times, by a giant thornbush. One by one they dragged themselves to their feet and hobbled away in defeat. Deliah's train pulled into the station then and she quickly boarded it, glad when the doors finally closed behind her. She took a seat in the half-filled car and sat staring at the wall across from her. She wondered what had happened. They were going to beat her, or worse. But they hadn't. She looked down at the rose bush in her lap. Two of its thorns had drops of blood on them. Her hands tightened on the pot as she shivered.

At her stop Deliah left the train and climbed the stairs to the street. She noticed the clouds were gone from the sky now and she could even see a few of the brightest stars through the glare of the streetlamps. Her apartment was the third building on the left down this block. She was nearly home. As she walked, a light breeze tugged at her coat. Some of the buds and petals from the plant blew off and fell to the ground. Deliah was still dazed by her close call in the subway and confused about her apparent salvation. Plants, she thought, don't come to life and protect their owners like some battle-trained beast in her fantasy books. And if they did, then the last to do so would be a rose bush. She shook her head in confusion as she reached the sidewalk in front of her building. Then she heard them.

A young, slightly slurred male voice called out to her. "De- liii- ahh...De- liii- ahh," the voice called. The walk turned to the left away from the street to march up to the doorstep of her apartment building. Low bushes cordoned off the lawn from the sidewalk and the street. Straddling the sidewalk leading to her door was a gang of nearly a dozen young people, drinking and smoking their Friday night away. She would never be able to avoid them and get to her door. She would either have to go through them or walk away and hope they decided to move on soon. She was sure Henry would not be home for hours yet.

Deliah was so tired she decided to try to push her way through the crowd. Just in case, she recited to herself the last line of the spell from her book.

"Where are you going, De- lii- aahh?" one boy said, stepping in her way as she walked up the sidewalk toward her door with her head down. She looked up directly into his leering face. He had brown hair and muddy brown eyes. The beginnings of a mustache poked out of the skin above his lip. He smelled of liquor and cigarette smoke. Two smaller bullies flanked him. Now she could feel others behind her. She became deathly afraid for the second time that night. Why hadn't she just walked away? That was what she usually would have done. She might have even just turned around and gone the other way.

The boy on the left had blond hair to his shoulders and a red bandana around his head. "I don't think she wants to party with us, Patricio," he said.

"I think we should try to change her mind," the other kid on the right said, brushing long, straight bangs out of his eyes.

"Yeah, let's change her mind," a girl's voice shrilled from somewhere far behind Deliah. There were a lot of them around her, more in back than in front, she realized. She thought of running, but she was surrounded.

"Get out of my way!" Deliah yelled, pushing Patricio aside. "I'm tired and I'm going home! Why don't you all go get jobs!" Deliah stunned herself with her cool nerve. She took two steps past Patricio, and the toughs stepped aside, their mouths hanging open. Then some-

thing hit her in the back. She fell forward to the ground, the air knocked out of her. Her bag with the ice cream and gum flew onto the lawn. The plant fell to the cement, the pot shattering into a hundred pieces. Deliah lay sprawled on her stomach. She turned her head to the right. The rose bush looked pathetic, its leaves and petals splayed out on the sidewalk. Legs and sneakered feet danced around her, their owners screaming and cursing.

Deliah rolled onto her back. She had broken her fall with her left hand, but now her wrist hurt like it had been sprained. She clutched it with her other hand. A heavy-set girl jumped on top of her and straddled Deliah's stomach. Hands grabbed her hair and pulled. Deliah screamed in pain and fear. Then someone, or something, screamed in rage.

The weight lifted off her stomach suddenly. Shouts and screams filled the night air. Deliah got to her feet and was nearly knocked right down again by the backside of a horse. The horse was a huge shadow in front of her, screaming and rising on its hind legs as it slashed its hooves at her attackers. Deliah stumbled up the sidewalk toward her door, glad to get away from the fight. She looked back and watched in awe. A tall, slim figure in a green and red uniform, wielding a lance that looked for all the world like a giant thorn, was chasing her tormentors away from her building. Now that she looked more carefully, both the horse and rider didn't appear to be made out of flesh and blood, but out of twisted masses of vines, leaves and blood-red petals. A voice yelled out at the retreating villains, "The castle of lady Deliah is inviolate now and forever! Stay well away, villains, or I'll cut you all into pulp!"

Deliah closed her eyes and shook her head. She opened her eyes and looked again. The horse and rider were still there. They turned and came clopping up the sidewalk toward her. The horse was beautiful, with eyes red and glowing with pride, its head high, its flowing mane of green leaves glossy in the streetlights. The rider was no less magnificent. She would have appeared totally human were it not for the leafy veins in her green skin. Her eyes were a gentle pink and her long, straight hair the deep brown of freshly turned earth. She bowed to Deliah in the saddle. "Lady, my name is Phalerin. Don't be afraid of what you've seen tonight. I am only returning a favor. I don't know any better than you what has happened. I don't even know how I got my name. But I think there's magic involved. The magic that led you to feel pity for a castoff like me; to tend a sick plant out of tenderness. Or maybe the magic was in the words you read tonight, in your tears and in your need for a source of courage. Then again, it could just as well have been the result of the moon and the tides. In any case, should you ever need courage again, just think of the magic of this night and you will have it. Fare well."

Phalerin was gone. Deliah walked out of the place on the sidewalk where she had fallen. The plant was still there. She gathered it up in the palms of her hands and carried it back up to her apartment.

That night, as Henry slept beside her, Deliah arose, took the repotted plant out of the bathroom, and placed it on the ledge of her window. She opened her book and turned to the beginning of the last chapter. She read the words on the top of the page in a whisper. As she looked out over the city that night, she no longer saw tall concrete buildings. The land was transformed. Now through her bedroom window she saw the towers of Queen Phalerin's castle and the rolling hills of Helevar beneath it. She looked over Henry's snoring form and wondered if there was a spell somewhere in the book that might make him fit in after all. ❧

John S. Manor is 35 years old, married, and has a two year old son who loves "choo choos" which works out well since Dad works as a railroad conductor.

Deliah is his second fiction sale to *FANTASY Magazine*. Its inspiration was a particularly dreary, depressing day. A fantasy world seemed much more appealing at the time. John's next goal is to write his first novel, a fantasy, and sell it. He would like to make writing his full-time job.

His other interests include stargazing, reading sf and fantasy, and analyzing how some of his favorite short stories are put together, and attending conventions.

Janet Kramer lives in San Carlos, California, where she works as a graphics artist for Sun MicroSystems. She has been displaying artwork at science fiction conventions since 1979. She has done assorted computer animation projects and illustrated a game for LucasFilms.

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BOULDER, COLORADO:
UNIVERSITY BOOK CENTER
WASHINGTON, D.C.:
LAMMAS BOOK STORE
GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA:
NOVEL IDEAS
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CHRIS DRUMM BOOKS
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS:
CHICAGO MAIN NEWSSTAND
WOMEN & CHILDREN FIRST
OAK FOREST:
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ST. LOUIS:
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RALEIGH, N. CAROLINA:
DJ'S COLLEGE BOOK & NEWS
LA VISTA, NEBRASKA:
STAR REALM
NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY:
COMIC ATTITUDES
NEWARK:
JOHN BETANCOURT
NEW YORK, NEW YORK:
FORBIDDEN PLANET SCIENCE FICTION SHOP

Marion Zimmer Bradley Talks To Writers:

When I Ignore My Own Guidelines

There's a famous story about the great Jewish philosopher Hillel. He was asked by a skeptic to sum up the Jewish faith in the time he could stand on one foot; he answered that "the Law and all the Prophets" were contained in what Jesus later called the first and great commandment — "Love God — and thy neighbor as thyself." Of course, that carries a great difficulty — modern psychology seems to be mostly self-esteem; when I was a little kid, *self-esteem* or "self love" was the greatest of sins. Overdone, too much self-esteem could lead one to call all one's least whims a Sacred Duty — as with absentee parents or men who fail to pay child support, talking about their "duty to themselves". (I knew those college Bible classes would come in handy.)

The Whole Duty of writers goes like this: Thou shalt read the magazine you're submitting to BEFORE submitting. If you just can't get a copy of the magazine, *read the guidelines.* In fact, I consider that so important that I'll repeat it: READ THE GUIDELINES.

As with all rules, they have exceptions. With the first Sword & Sorceress volume I'll never forget the thrill of finding Emma Bull's story "The Rending Dark" in the slush pile, even though it was sf. She couldn't read the "no sf" rule in the guidelines because there weren't any yet. That was also true of the first issues of the magazine; some writers, seeing a new market, took the opportunity to empty their files and offer me an old reject, but a few sent me stories so good I couldn't resist them.

The only one of my guidelines I *never* override is the one about *length*; if your story's too long but really good I suggest that the author go ahead and write a novel. There's plenty of room in the paperback original field — you don't even need an agent. (I've said before and will say again that *in general* the kind of agent you can get *without* a good record of sales, you're better off without. There are probably exceptions to this rule too, so don't all jump on me.)

I'd also say: *read the magazine.* I wish I had a nickel for every young hopeful who has sent me a script whose letter starts, "I have never seen an issue of your magazine, but I'm sending you this." Too bad, kiddies. Most — again, not all — of these hopeful submissions wind up being better aimed at some other market: occult, children's, or even horror.

That's another example. We are not primarily a children's market. While all stories must be *suitable* for children, they are aimed at the kind of children who don't read children's books — except the kind of children's books which can be read by adults. Early Heinleins, for example; I have yet to read a better science fiction novel than Heinlein's The Star Beast, but you wouldn't have found it in *Child Life.* Nor in *FANTASY Magazine.* I did print one — no — two sf stories in the magazine; the main one that comes to mind is Diana Paxon's story and some others in the short-short issue; Diana's "Dancer from chimaera" struck me as having the fantasy flavor of the late Catherine L Moore. But no other story has been that good. If a story starts out with a spaceship, I probably won't read it through. If you want to slip one by me, your story should be so good that I read it with delight, and say afterward, "But — *but* — that's really science fiction." If it's so good I simply can't bear to part with it, I'll print it. Anything else, I'll probably say, "Send it to an sf magazine." You're taking quite a risk sending it to me. The same goes for horror.

One thing you'll probably not be able to slip by is poetry. There might be an exception if the poetry is *perfect* in rhyme and scansion. But don't try to slip fourth-rate blank verse through, or any near-misses on rhyme. One teacher of writing once told me she did not allow rhyme in her creative writing classes; the search for rhyme beat out meaning. I replied, "Only for incompetents." Argument over. No poetry.

The writer also ought to know a little about the editor's pet peeves. Mine is people who can't *spell;* I used to put it for Sword & Sorceress: "People who can't spell *sorcerer* shouldn't write about them." (Again, if I had a nickel for everyone who tried to spell it "*sorceror*" we'd be more solvent.) I assume you all know how to use a dictionary; if not, *learn.* That's why, in general, I think a beginning writer doesn't need a word processor; they think because their manuscript *looks* good it *is* good. I'd prefer neatly marked ink corrections rather than misspellings. If you can't spell, have it read by someone who *can.*

But, of course, in this column I'm preaching to the converted. You'd never make these silly mistakes — would you?

❧

Writers Talk Back

A Writer on Writing: The Pros and Cons of Writers' Circles

by Mercedes Lackey

You want to be a professional writer. You're putting out prose that seems pretty good to you — but all you collect are rejection slips. Or — you're afraid to send it out at all. Then a friend tells you about a local writers' circle — a group of writers, who may or may not include professionals among their ranks, who gather at regular intervals to critique each other's work.

Well, that sounds wonderful! A way to get critique without the pain of getting a rejection slip! And without having to wait weeks or months just to get "This does not suit our purposes at his time..."

But is it? Well, there are pros and cons to writers' circles. Like the little girl with the little curl, when they are good, they are very, very good, and when they are bad, they are worse than useless.

First, the pros. One: you get immediate critique. Two: you get critique from a variety of people. Three: one of your fellows may have a suggestion that can salvage a real problem story. Four: you and your fellows can share resources and advice on new markets. Five: you and your fellows can encourage each other at a point where you may be ready to give up.

Now the cons. One: the critique you get may or may not be valid. Too many writers' circles degenerate into either round-

robin self-congratulation clubs, or into cliques where new people or people with new ideas — or those who have actually made a sale — get picked on. Two: the circle may not have enough people working in your special field to make it worth your while. One writer I know quit his local circle because he was the only sf/f writer in it, and the critique he got from the leader of the circle, a local teacher at a college, was that the fellow couldn't tell it was an SF story because there weren't any rocketships in it. Three: your fellow writers may be at the same point you are — and you're all making the same mistakes. And none of you will *see* that they are mistakes because none of you *can*, yet. Four: being critiqued in public may not be for you. It's one thing to be philosophical about a rejection slip, and another to have people tell you to your face that there's something wrong with your work. Five: the circle isn't a place to be critiqued, it's merely an excuse to get together and pretend to be having writers' block for the sake of sympathy.

How do you tell the difference between a good circle and a bad one? Look for the following danger signs: writers telling another that the rejection slip he just got is "all wrong" and the editor "obviously didn't read the story." Writers writing an endless series of in-joke stories. Writers picking on one person consistently, not because of flaws in the story, but because of personality problems. Writers picking on each other, rather than giving valid critique. Writers *not writing*, making the same excuses week after week for not having anything to read. Writers with no interests in common with you. Writers' circles with no one in them who has made the break to pro.

I never participated in a circle as such; I was fortunate enough to be "mentored" by another pro writer. I have seen very good writers come out of circles like the Scribblies of Minneapolis, the circle in Kansas City, and the Moscow Mofia of Idaho. I have also seen good writers stalled by being in a circle that was going nowhere and doing nothing.

The best advice: keep your mind and eyes open — and remember that ultimately, the person responsible for getting you published is *you*.

❧

The Story of a Failure
by Barbara Rosen

Not too long ago I corresponded with a writer whose story had appeared in a small fantasy magazine. I'd mentioned the story in a letter to the editor; my letter was printed in the following issue and the author wrote to me directly.

After that we exchanged letters for a period of several months. As I also write, much of our correspondence centered on what ideas we were trying to develop, how the work was going and how it was being received by the editors to whom it was sent.

Initially I had assumed, since my pen pal's story had appeared in a magazine which had rejected all my submissions, that he was widely published — that he had, in fact, succeeded in breaking in as a writer. But nothing could have been further from the truth: I gradually learned, to my astonishment, that he had hardly been published at all!

I was not only astonished but outraged; it didn't make sense.

First of all, the guy was a solid, competent writer. Even his letters told me that! He was literate, he was funny, he knew how to get a story across. He had a good ear for dialogue ... I went back and read his story again, No, I hadn't been mistaken; this fellow could write.

Where, I asked him, are you sending your stories? And I mailed him a list of those editors who had been extraordinarily decent to me, who had consistently taken the time to critique the stories I'd submitted. A couple of them had even sent me copies of their magazine to demonstrate where I'd gone wrong. Getting that kind of feedback made me feel valued as a writer and a person, even when my story was rejected.

But no, my pen pal felt it was beneath him to submit to nonpaying markets. The workman is worthy of his hire, said he.

I supposed that was true, up to a point. But if it came to a choice between having a story accepted for no pay, and not having the story accepted at all, I, for one, wanted to see my stuff in print. After all, we were doing this for the fun of it, weren't we?

Once again I was quickly set straight. Maybe I was doing it for fun, but my correspondent wanted nothing less than professional status. That is, he wanted to quit his job and earn his keep with his typewriter, like Stephen King.

Come on, I answered, nobody does that! I mean, Stephen King, for heaven's sake!

And what, he wanted to know, was so great about Stephen King? Everybody knew that King couldn't write! Besides if he, my pen pal, didn't have to slave away at his boring job every day, maybe he would have the time to write that well himself!

The logic of this argument took my breath away.

I suppose I ought to have been prepared for what came next, but it shocked and outraged me even more than the information that my pen pal had met with such limited success. He announced that he was going to quit. Perhaps, he suggested, his inability to find a market was his own fault. Perhaps it was time to admit defeat, to have the maturity to realize that he didn't have what it took to be a writer after all.

Nonsense, I said. (I said a great deal more, but "nonsense" about sums it up.)

My pen pal didn't buy it. I should not, he wrote, presume to preach to my elders and betters. Time enough to preach when I had been frustrated by twenty-five years of failure myself.

That was impossible, I snapped. I'd had seventeen stories accepted — in only four years. But, I added, I didn't think my writing was any better than his was. I wasn't being kind, either. I meant it.

The correspondence made me wonder, though; why do people write? What slipped gear in some of us manifests itself in story? Is it a benign form of madness? Or is it a sacred trust? And, if it is a trust, do we abandon it only at the risk of losing our souls?

I treated my pen pal to some Milton:

"And that one talent which 'tis death to hide
Lodged with me useless
Though my soul was born to serve my maker and present
My true account, lest he returning chide..."

But he didn't buy that either; since he didn't believe in God, he told me, his talent belonged to nobody but himself.

I didn't think it made much difference whether we believe in God or not; the point I'd been trying to make was that to deny them is a form of suicide.

My frustration drove me to verses of my own:

"If your writing weren't good
It'd be a crime, it really would;
To tell you, after all these falls,
To keep hurling yourself at granite walls..."

But it was no good; none of it was any good. Nothing I said made any impression at all.

A few exchanges after I sent the poem, my pen pal chose not to answer my latest letter and the correspondence ended.

I had failed.

❧

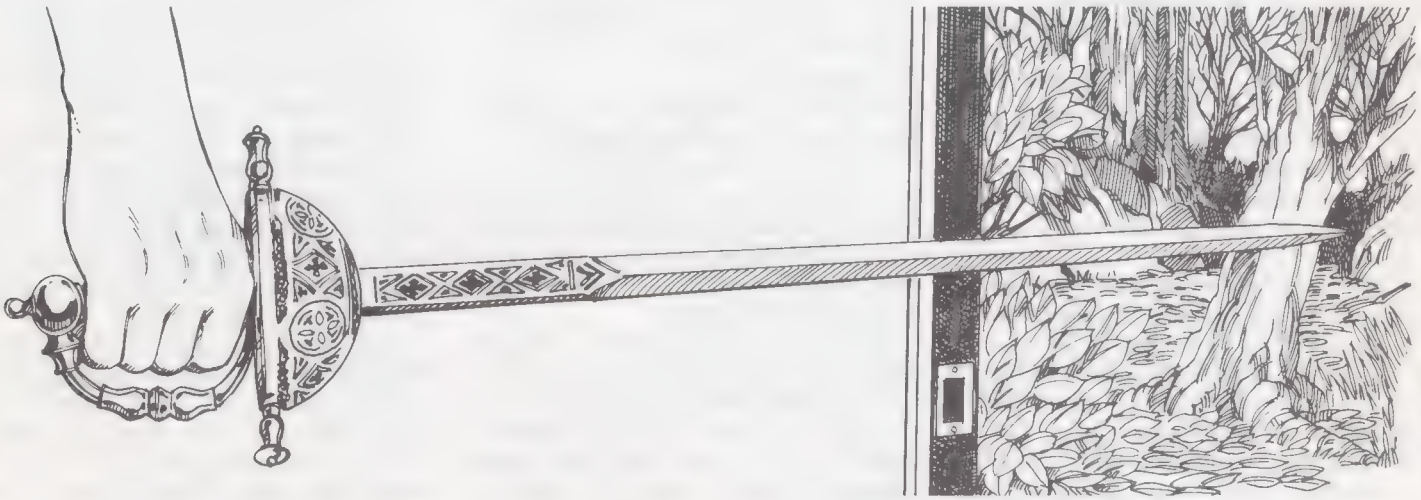
The PAPER KNIFE

by Gloria Wall

I've never been the sort to fall asleep while reading, but Immanuel Kant was doing it to me. One minute I was wondering what the translator meant by "linguistic building" and the next my eyes were sliding closed. In another minute my nose was going to land right in the middle of "The Good, the Sublime, and the Beautiful". A brisk walk to 7-11, I decided, and something crunchy to eat. So I let my Lit Crit book fall to the floor with a satisfying thunk, exercised will power, and got myself off the bed. Swinging my purse over my shoulder, I opened the door.

Now, I'm pretty familiar with the scenery outside my dorm room door: varying widths of horizontal stripes in shades of brown and orange, interrupted by doors. But I didn't see that. I saw a forest of tall narrow trees with pale bark and moss growing on the shady side.

Each tree had a leafy mass of shoots springing up from the roots like yellow and green foam. The trees receded into the distance, broken here and there by a stand of fern taller than me. As I stood staring, the edge of the door solid enough in my hand, a coal-black squirrel spiraled down around a tree trunk and



Artwork by James Balkovek

landed in a drift of leaves almost at my feet. It busied itself digging around for something, not seeming to see me at all.

Then a flash of brown and white streaked down onto the squirrel, which let out a shrill squeak. I was so startled I jumped back. The door shut with a bang.

The next minute I opened it again, with caution. Hallway and doors. Again, more quickly. Hallway. I kept opening that door until I saw something different — the girl across the hall staring at me from *her* open door.

"Oh, hi, Deb," I said. "I was just checking my door. To see if it squeaks."

"It's not now," she pointed out.

"I guess not," I replied weakly, and let myself out, turning to lock up. By the time I turned around again, she was gone, thank goodness.

An application of cold air and pretzels enabled me to get through the rest of Kant, but I'm not sure any of it stuck. I was still nervous about opening my door when I went down to dinner. Standing in line, showing my card, choosing my food at random, I was thinking in the same circles I'd been going around all afternoon. Suppose it happened again. What should I do? Suppose I was deep in a book and just opened the door and walked out without looking? Or suppose it never happened again. My one and only chance — to do what? Have an adventure? Lose myself forever?

"Hey, Trish, sleepwalking again?"

Maybe that was it, maybe I *had* fallen asleep over Kant and —

My tray was lifted from my hands and I realized I was standing dead still in the middle of the dining hall.

"Oh, hi, Red," I said. Red is somebody I know from church back home, who happened to pick the same out-of-state college as I did.

"For once you haven't got a book with you, and you're still in the Twilight Zone." He put my tray down next to his.

"I was thinking," I said, pulling out my chair, which tangled in the straps of Red's backpack under the table. A book with a spaceship and a dragon on the cover was sticking out of the pocket. Inspiration struck. "About a story I'm writing," I added, as I sat down. "Maybe you can help me." I picked up a forkful of grayish noodles and looked at them doubtfully. "What would you do if...if you opened your dorm room door and there were a forest?"

"You mean the door to another world routine?"

"I guess."

"Go through, of course."

I put down my fork. "Would you really?"

"Couldn't stop me."

"But it could be dangerous, or you might not be able to get back. This isn't a book, this is real life."

"But it is a book, isn't it? Or a story, anyway."

"Of course," I said quickly, "but you know what I mean. If it were real, what would you do?"

Red thoughtfully stirred a puddle of melted ice cream. "I'd take some food with me, and weapons."

"This is your dorm room, remember."

"Everybody's got food in their rooms. And I have a machete."

"You do? Where'd you get a machete?"

"My uncle's a missionary, remember?"

"Oh, right." I tried the gray noodles. They tasted better than I would have guessed.

"I know what I'd do," said Red suddenly. "I'd tie a rope to myself, and the other end to my bed or something."

"That's a really good idea," I said. "But who has a rope in their dorm room?"

"I do."

"You would." Red goes to camp every summer: horse camp, sailing camp, mountain climbing. It'd be all very well for him to go wandering off into some strange forest. I can't tell north from south when the sun is setting and have been known to get lost inside people's houses.

"So what's it about?" asked Red.

"What's what about?"

"The story."

"I told you. This girl opens her dorm room door and there's a forest."

"Yeah, but what's really going on?"

"I don't know yet," I said slowly. "There has to be a reason, I suppose. Why that door, or that person. In stories, it's usually something big, like saving the world, or at least a kingdom."

"Unless it's some kind of accident," suggested Red. "But then they always end up saving the world anyway."

I didn't want to eat any more. I couldn't decide if it was worse maybe having missed my chance to save the world, or maybe not having missed it. The people in stories generally had a rough time of it.

"If it were real," said Red, breaking in on my thoughts again, "I wouldn't assume anything. Maybe stuff like this is completely random. Maybe doors just pop open for no reason."

"But then you'd have people disappearing all the time," I objected.

"But people do disappear all the time." I found this very comforting, especially since he followed it up with, "Got a class, gotta run. See you around."

Back to 7-11 again. Even if I hadn't really decided what to do, there was no harm in making a few preparations. Provisions, at any rate. There isn't a lot of real food at 7-11, but I settled on a box of Breakfast Bars, "eaten aboard the space shuttle". They don't sell rope at 7-11. Not even clothesline.

It happened again, of course, or there wouldn't be much point in me writing this or you reading it. It was about a week later, in the evening this time. I should mention that I am currently without a roommate. She left in the middle of the third week, complaining that nobody had told her you had to go to chapel. Left me with a $50 phone bill, too.

On the evening in question, her former bed was covered with open books because I was supposedly writing a paper. They tried to teach me all that ditzing around with index cards in high school, but it didn't stick. So I had my sources all spread out around me, and I had sort of an outline. I decided to go down to the TV lounge and see what people were watching. I grabbed my keys, opened the door and —

Forest. A large brown bird with white patches on its wings and tail was pecking at the eyes of a dead squirrel. I backed up slowly, grabbed a piece of crumpled paper from the trash can, and chucked it through the door. The bird startled in a flurry of feathers and took off.

The crumpled paper lay there next to the squirrel, looking very much like litter. I considered reaching through the door to get it, but I thought maybe once I put my hand through I might get sucked in or something. Or the whole thing might go pop like a soap bubble.

I grabbed up my cape and dumped the Breakfast Bar box into one pocket, keeping my eyes on the door in case it vanished while I wasn't looking. But then I decided I'd better give one good look around the room and ask myself if there was anything I'd better take.

Money? As if it would be any good, or I had any to speak of. Jewelry? Most of it was junk, of course, but I did have a string of real pearls.

Then I saw it, next to the jewelry box. I did have a weapon in my room. I had a paper knife.

I had bought it in Solvang, in a shop with a display case full of miniature

swords, gaudy with glass gems. This one had stood out, not having fake gemstones, just an attractive cross-and-saber hilt with a bowl-shaped guard decorated with pretty enamel work. More enamel work ran an inch or so down the blade. Its two edges were dull, of course, but it had a wickedly sharp point, and it was made of real Toledo steel.

I snatched it up and snapped my eyes back toward the open doorway, where there was still forest. The knife was sharp enough to pierce a pocket lining, but fortunately I was wearing painters' pants and the hammer pocket was too narrow to let the knife slip all the way to the bottom.

Then there was nothing for it but to step through.

One hand clamped on the door frame. One foot into the leaves, which crunched. Two feet. It was definitely colder out here than in my room. Sliding my hand down the door frame, I bent for the piece of paper, avoiding the dead squirrel. I tossed it back into the room. Then I tossed in a handful of leaves. They lay there on the carpet, brown on brown, like ordinary dead leaves. I don't know enough about trees to know if their shapes were at all unusual. The squirrel would probably have been better evidence, but I wasn't about to touch it. I told myself it probably had nasty germs.

I let go of the door. Nothing happened. I tried walking around a tree. The door was still there, which was encouraging, though the tree was skinny enough I could see the door the whole time. I decided to go around one of the ferny patches.

That's when I started hearing the noises, fast crunchy ones, like someone running. Like several someones. I decided I would go inside the patch of ferns. The ferns turned out to be in a hollow, which I stumbled into. Then I crouched down. The noises got louder and closer. I couldn't see, and when I shifted slightly the ferns shuddered all the way to the top. I decided I didn't need to see that badly.

I heard one person run by, then the others in a group. Then there was a louder crunch like someone falling down, and then a mess of random noises, like people fighting. I kept waiting for someone to speak or yell or something, but nobody did. There were some gasps and grunts, but nothing with words in it.

Then everybody went over to this one spot to the right of me and started doing something quieter, something that took a lot of rustling, and then there were several loud whacks, like someone chopping wood.

I was considering risking a peek, though I knew it was probably stupid, when I heard the crunch, crunch of people walking away. As the sounds faded I waffled between staying put until I couldn't hear anything (and counted to a hundred after that just to make sure) and peeking out to see what these people were like while they presumably had their backs to me. Only suppose they looked back? They didn't seem to be very nice people, what with all this fighting, and nobody saying a word.

Artwork by James Balkovek

By the time I talked myself into moving, I couldn't see anything between the parted ferns. I disentangled myself as quietly as I could, all the while keeping watch in the direction which I thought they'd gone. Then I turned to check if the door was still there.

Except I didn't actually notice the door right then. I was too distracted by seeing a person not thirty feet away from me. He wasn't doing anything, since he was tied to a tree.

He had his eyes closed, which made it a little easier to stare at him, not that I could think of anything else useful to do. A guy tied to a tree — a kid, really, because now that I was looking I guessed him at a couple years younger than me. Dark hair and skin, that too-good-to-be-true tanned color like the Hawaiian guys I knew in junior high. Not a color that shows bruises, though there was a nasty scrape oozing blood down the side of his face.

He was tied pretty thoroughly, shoulders, waist, knees and ankles, and I couldn't see his hands at all, because they were behind him, probably bound separately. What I could see of his sleeves was a dull gold color, and one of them was ripped at the shoulder. The tunic he was wearing was heavy brocade in several shades of green, stuff you'd pay twenty bucks a yard for on sale, but there was a threadbare line showing where the hem had been let down. And he was wearing leggings made of rabbit fur, mixed colors, with criss-crossed leather holding them on.

And about three feet above his head there was a sword. The blade had been driven into the tree so it stood straight out like a flagpole on the side of a building. The hilt had been wrapped in leather strips like the ones on the kid's leggings.

I decided maybe I'd better say something. "Um, hello?" was the best I could manage.

His eyes snapped open, then widened. With that coloring they should have been brown, but they were green. When he was done looking startled, he started looking suspicious, unless it was just puzzled.

"What's going on?" I asked, and then felt really stupid. Since his expression didn't change, I added, "Parlez-vous français?" rather hopelessly, and followed it with "Haben Sie Deutsch?" though I didn't have any either. While I was trying to remember how to ask in Spanish, he finally spoke.

That is, he spat out a couple of words containing consonants not found in English and returned to staring. Probably "Avaunt, evil spirit", or something of that nature.

"Okay," I said. "I guess I wouldn't trust me either if I were you. I wonder what this is all about? Those guys going to come back, or what?" No point waiting for an answer, I reminded myself. But what was I going to do? Maybe this was my chance to save the world, or at least some kid, who was cute enough to be the hero of a story, anyway. But cute or not, kid or not, for all I knew this guy was a terrible criminal, who was tied to a tree because he deserved it. Some of these rapists and murderers you hear about

start awfully young, and a lot of them are cute, too...

My hands were getting cold, so I dug them down into my cape pockets. There was the box of Breakfast Bars. A bit of chocolate crunch wouldn't be such a bad thing right now, I thought. I opened the box in my pocket and got one out, then tore open the wrapper and pushed the box back in the pocket.

Breakfast Bars smell like chocolate, but they taste like gravel. The kid was still staring at me, and I was still mostly staring at him, and when I took that first bite I thought he looked pretty intent. Maybe he was hungry. Maybe they left him there to starve. Even if he *was* a criminal, I couldn't eat in front of him if he was starving. I fetched out another Bar. "Do you want one of these? I suppose I could..." but I realized I couldn't really.

If I was going to feed him, I might as well let him go. It wouldn't be a kindness otherwise. And besides, I couldn't really imagine feeding him bite by bite with my fingers, somehow.

"Just a minute," I said, returning the wrapped bar to my pocket. "I'm going to get you out of that." I decided the best thing to do with the unwrapped and bitten-into one was to finish it off quickly. Besides, I needed it.

It was kind of strange, going up close, but I walked around the tree, checking the ropes. The knots were all in back, and they were pretty tight. Pretty soon my fingers were red and sore — it was rough and prickly rope, and I'm allergic to hemp. Several weeks of tying hanging planters for a Junior Achievement company had almost finished me off. It occurred to me that I could scoot the whole rope around the tree, working the knots over to the air space between the kid and the tree, and then I could get in behind the knots.

This worked but was embarrassing, since there was no way to do it without touching him. He kind of stiffened up when I did, but then I realized he understood what I was up to and was making himself as thin as possible, squishing up against the tree and breathing out. I started with the elbow level because I was hoping to get his hands free. He had to be better at knots than I was. It wasn't so much that the knots were hard to figure out as that they were really tight. I pulled and pried and mostly just hurt myself.

Then I remembered the paper knife, and fetched it out. It had no cutting edge, but I thought I might use it to pry with, and it helped a little. I actually began to get one of the knots undone.

"That's better," I said aloud, and looked up at the kid, who was staring more curiously than ever, not at me, but at the knife. "If only this had an edge, I could cut the ropes — but you have a sword, don't you? Assuming that's yours, and not something they left here to show that you're sentenced to death, or something..." I looked up at the sword as I spoke, and now that I was more or less under it I could see what I hadn't before: the pattern running down the blade. Black quatrefoils in white diamonds, with the spaces between filled alternately in red and blue. The cup-shaped guard was enamelled also on the side facing the tree, with a more complicated pattern that alternated diamonds and circles. A familiar pattern. The one on my paper knife.

I stared at the sword, then I stared at the knife and then back at the sword again. Then I told myself that was enough of that and went back to the problem at hand. I had to get this guy out of here. Suppose he was left here for something to come and get him? I wished I hadn't thought of that, but it suggested a little hurrying was in order.

The question was, could I get the sword? I was never very good at climbing trees, and my hands were already roughed up, but maybe the ropes would make good toeholds. But even if I could get up there, how would I get it out? I'd have to grab it by the blade somehow, and I bet it was sharp, unlike this useless piece of metal. Maybe I could wrap my cape around it, though. Or maybe I could get it down that way somehow, snag it with the cape and pull it down? Assuming I could throw the cape up there, and reach it afterwards, and that the sword wasn't too firmly stuck, and that it wouldn't whack one of us as it came down.

Then I realized how stupid I was being. What I *really* needed was a pair of scissors, and I had one back in my dorm room, a good sharp pair reserved for needlework, that had never touched a piece of paper. Cutting all this rope would probably ruin them, but one must have priorities.

With a sudden panicky feeling I checked to see if the door was still there. It was.

"Listen," I said, because I felt I had to explain, even if he couldn't understand, "I'm going to go back to my room real quick and grab the scissors. I'll be right back."

I ran to the doorway, where I stopped and took a deep breath before stepping through. Then I was afraid to take my eyes off the tree framed in the door. I couldn't see the kid, but I could see the ropes. I backed over to my needlework basket and felt around in it. Where were those wretched scissors? In the cross-stitch kit? No. Under the crocheting yarn, clear down in the bottom? No.

I dumped the basket, and the slithering clang drew my eyes. I grabbed the scissors, straightened up — and there was the hallway. Orange and brown stripes. When I could move, I closed the door and opened it again. Lots of times. Who cares what Deb thinks anyway?

I'm sure the paper knife must be the key somehow. I thought about carrying it around with me, but decided I don't really want to be launched unprepared into another world at any time, so it stays handy in my dorm room. Right next to the scissors. And the rope. What happens two times can very well happen three, and the business with the squirrel and the bird makes me hope that time is not passing while I'm waiting. If it is, there's nothing I can do about it, so I'm trying not to worry, though the whole thing is having a bad effect on the papers I'm supposed to be writing.

I did take the paper knife out once, though. I looked up a knife grinder in the phone book and had it sharpened. Just in case.

❧

GLORIA WALL says this is not only her first published work of fiction, but the first one she's been brave enough to send out anywhere. She comments, "I think I'll send out a few more."

She adds, "I have a husband named Larry. I have four children, and I find time for writing by getting up earlier than they do (hard) and letting the housework go (easy). I'm a native of the 'Valley' area of Los Angeles, where I run a writers' group known as the Rustic (or Rusty or Rude) Mechanicals. I did Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Seattle Pacific University, and linguistics at the Summer Institute of Linguistics, UC Berkeley, and UCLA. I used to write for *Fantasy Review*, when it was a magazine, and for *ShortForm*, when it used to review things. I have been known in the past as Gloria Biggar, and as Thisbe."

JAMES BALKOVEK is one of *FANTASY Magazine*'s most popular artists. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

An Interview with Pat Murphy

By Sandra Brandenburg and Debora Hill

Whatever you do, don't tell Pat Murphy that you've wanted to write since the first time your grandmother read to you from Kipling's Just So Stories, no matter how true that might be. She says, *"I hate people who say they knew they wanted to be writers when they were kids, and they grew up to be writers. I read voraciously when I was a kid, but I always believed that writers were people who had been touched by God. I figured there was some divine spark that made people know, when they were around five years old, that some day they were going to be a writer. I never had that knowledge, so I never thought I could be one. Until I was in college. I had a professor who said to me, 'you know, you're really a good writer.' So when I was a sophomore in college I started doing short stories."*

From that point on, Murphy's pen does not seem to have stopped. She has three published novels, the first of which, The Shadow Hunter, is not currently available in the United States. The second, The Falling Woman, took a Nebula Award. Her latest is The City, Not Long After, and it should be required reading for the Pentagon and every member of the United Nations. In this book she wages war with everything from light illusions to toy trucks, and hardly anybody dies. She has also authored an impressive collection of short stories; one of which, "Rachel in Love", won her a second Nebula (published in an anthology entitled Points of Departure in 1990). Murphy has been employed by several smaller publications and is currently the editor of *The Exploratorium Quarterly* in San Francisco.

When it comes to making a career of writing, it seems that a certain persistence (one hates to call it stubbornness, but if it is, it's working) is of value. *"I sold my first story when I was still in college. I made a vow that I would send out stories until I had a hundred rejection slips, and that would be the indication that I wasn't going to be a writer. I sold the story after my tenth rejection slip, but it was another two years before I sold one again. I had made the vow, I sold the story — all of a sudden I was a writer, and I had to keep going."*

Keep going she did. Her aids were persistence and an eye to the kind of job that gives one practical experience. *"I took my degree in Biology, with a minor in Science Writing. My first job out of college was as feature editor for a tiny, local newspaper that lasted four months and went out of business. They give you your first break and then they fall apart. It happens to everyone, but it's good experience. Being a feature editor, I wrote anything on the features page. I wasn't really editing anything, I just wrote it all. After that I had a series of jobs involving writing of one kind or another."*

She has been editing *The Exploratorium Quarterly* for eight years or so, which just goes to show that a biology degree and a talent for the fantastic have their place in the modern world. *"It's a fun magazine, and each issue is on a different topic. This means that four times a year I learn just about all I care to learn on a particular subject. We did one on amusement parks, and one on toys; right now I've just finished one on food. I write some articles, and edit articles by other people at the museum. The Exploratorium, as we see ourselves, enters into the realms of science, art, and human perception. I look for a mix of articles dealing with science, art, culture, anthropology...the Quarterly provides a way of looking at the world from different perspectives."* This way of looking at things spills over into her books.

Pat Murphy is an energetic young woman, and her personal style is eclectic to say the least. She is trim and disciplined, and you can't help but feel that she could be entrusted with your heirloom rubies. When you asked for them back, some ten years later, she would drag them out of a strange hiding place like the hollow of a statue or a cleverly hidden drawer carved into the arm of her couch. In far less that ten years her sense of humor would have forced her to do something more entertaining than merely putting the pretty things in a safety deposit box. The day we met she was wearing bright red leggings, a tunic top with puppy dogs on it, and large, colorful earrings. Her hair is short except for the long, braided tail she sports. Murphy presents an image that is in exact parallel with her writing.

"Taking things to extremes is what makes fantasy and science fiction work. The Shadow Hunter came out in 1982, when I was twenty-seven. I'd made another of my foolish vows; I said I was going to publish a novel before I was thirty. I had an agent because by that time I'd written about ten short stories that were published. I belonged to a writers' workshop in San Diego, and one of my friends there mentioned that his agent was looking for clients. I got my first agent on the basis of the short stories and an outline, with some chapters of the book."

If this sounds like a dream come true for a writer, the dream quickly turned nasty. The Shadow Hunter was sold to Ballantine Popular Library, at that time a subsidiary of CBS, Inc. All of Ballantine except the Popular Library imprint was subsequently sold off. Popular Library was retained by CBS long enough for them to publish another six books; one of them Murphy's debut novel. In the Popular Library catalogue for that year The Shadow Hunter received an entire page. That was the good news. The bad was that there were only those six books in the catalogue, and they each had a whole page...and the books were only in the stores for a few months. Although The Shadow Hunter has since been reissued in England, Murphy admits almost no one in the states knows about the book, and most people think The Falling Woman was her first published novel.

This wouldn't be such a bad arrangement, either, since The Falling Woman earned that first Nebula. And what about her second, for the "long/short", or novelette, "Rachel in Love"?

"Of my short stories, 'Rachel in Love' is the one that has attracted the most attention, and I think it has something to do with Rachel as a character. People sometimes ask me where I get ideas for stories, and that's one of the few cases where I can actually trace back and remember where the idea came from. While I was working as a feature editor, I interviewed a woman who wrote 'True Confession' stories. Before I interviewed her I read some of her stories, and they were completely formulaic. A young woman falls in love with the wrong man. For some reason, he's wrong for her. Throughout the story she has a faithful friend who sticks by her, and by the end of the story she realizes he's the one she really loves. Well, that was the story of 'Rachel in Love'. Rachel falls in love with the wrong person, because he's the wrong species; she's chimpanzee, he's human. Finally she realizes that Johnson, the chimp in the next cage, is her true love."

Murphy is one of the most outspoken advocates of non-violence I've ever interviewed, and this despite the fact that she holds a black belt in karate. In her story, "The Woman in the Trees," her heroine is a battered wife who retreats into the trees outside her house in order to escape from her husband and live with the other women there. There are two possible ways to interpret this — either the women are "tree sprites" of a sort, or the heroine actually dies in order to escape domestic violence. Murphy professed herself somewhat unsatisfied with the ending to the story; she wanted to come up with an ending in which the woman was able to resolve her problem — she decided to retreat to the trees and return when she thought of a solution. When I mentioned that my solution would have been to have the wife kill the husband (this wouldn't have worked in the story, of course, because it would negate the fantasy), Murphy expressed the opinion that this wasn't a solution, because I was allowing the wife to become as violent as the husband. She believes that family violence can't be solved by more violence (she doesn't offer a better solution, however) — what she doesn't seem willing to accept is that if the husband were dead the wife would be free, while if she managed to leave him, *he* would be free to abuse someone else. The concept of an evil that must be stopped is a difficult one for Murphy. She seems to share the societal prejudice that says evil is an illness to be treated rather than removed from our company.

For a writer who is so pacifist regarding violence and aggression, much of Murphy's work is obsessed with death and violence. Again she denies she is passive, but rather that she is searching for other ways to react to violence besides passivity (or a violent defense). In The City, Not Long After, a group of artists and artisans have taken over San Francisco following a plague that wiped out most of the population of the world. Due to the drastically diminished population, these people are able to transform parts of the city into enormous works of art; one of them even gathers together a group to paint the Golden Gate Bridge in varying shades of blue, so it ends up looking like a piece of solid sky. When the San Franciscans are attacked by a would-be dictator, they wage war on his troops by knocking them out with drugged darts and painting "dead" across their foreheads with paint that cannot be removed.

All this is pure Murphy, right up to the point where the San Franciscans are forced to kill the general. Although it has been clear throughout most of the book that in order to preserve their freedom and ensure the freedom of the rest of the survivors in California, the artists will have to kill him, Murphy still cannot reconcile this fact with her principles. Her hero has to die because he is the one to kill the general; her heroine dies in order to be with him, and they both become part of the crowd of ghosts that roam San Francisco.

Why is Murphy's outlook so bleak, when she writes so delightfully and includes such wonderful characters in that writing? And why does she believe there is no outcome worth fighting for, if fighting inevitably includes death and injury? Her personal experience notwithstanding, her characters do not become violent, even in self-defense, without paying a penalty.

"Being here (at the Exploratorium) has made me view the world differently. It makes you realize that what you see is not necessarily what's there; there are different ways of seeing the same thing, and it starts to shift your perspective in interesting ways. I don't think I would have written The City, Not Long After in quite the same way if I hadn't been working here. It's been more of an influence than my science background was, because my writing doesn't tend to be scientific in nature."

Murphy's "different world" is one of the imagination, the intellect. She is very much a literary writer — none of her work has to do with real life adventure; much of it has to do with a world within the mind, where the mundane escapes the drudgery of life. Even in her own life, most of Murphy's experimentation and searching has been in the realm of the mind, fueled by trips to Thailand, Nepal, Burma, and Mexico, working on an archaeological dig, and sailing the Bay Islands off the coast of Honduras. There is no stamp of struggle on Murphy, none of the signs of suffering most writers endure — just as her trips have been as a tourist, Murphy seems to have experienced suffering only as an observer. Her writings on abuse and violence are based on research she has done, and people she talked to. She is their voice, but she isn't sharing her own experiences, simply her insight into the experiences of others. Nearly all her work has been as a writer, starting with her first job after leaving college. She has been with the Exploratorium since her late twenties, and involved in a serious long-term relationship with another writer for an unspecified number of years.

Murphy is circumspect and careful in the way she goes about creating stories.

"One of the ways that I work up to writing a novel is to write some short stories set in the same world or with the same characters. 'Touch of the Bear' (included in Points of Departure) became The Shadow Hunter, and a novelette I wrote called 'Art in the War Zone' became The City, Not Long After. As regards the novel I'm currently working on (described as a 'historical/feminist/werewolf' story), I've written two short stories — one of them is in a recent Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine *and is called 'Travelling West', and the other will be in the most recent Byron Preiss anthology called The Ultimate Werewolf. The characters in the short stories are also in the book."*

Her travels have been turned to good advantage, and her work has a strong feel of the exotic. Whatever has happened in her life, she doesn't like to take the same imaginary trip twice.

"I don't see myself writing a fantasy trilogy or another book that's exactly like one I've written before. I think every book I've written has been pretty different from the one before it, and I don't see changing that. I'm interested in trying out different areas. They're all within the sf/fantasy area, but how much of each varies from book to book. I tend to write on borders, which isn't a good marketing strategy because it annoys people no end. The Shadow Hunter, my first book, had a time machine which was technological, and then it had a cave-bear spirit from Neanderthal mythology. So it was a mix of technology and mythology. Then I did The Falling Woman, in which the archaeology and anthropology were as accurate as I could make them — but the book also had the ghosts of the Mayans. The City, Not Long After was set in the near future — the extrapolation into the future is logical and in an sf fashion, but then you have this fantastic element in the city. So, I tend to write on the boundary between sf and fantasy, which I think annoys some parties. That's where I live. I do think borders are interesting places; the center of anything is usually not where things are happening — it's the edges where the action is. If you look at a country it's the borders where you have the clash of cultures and the transmission of new material mixing to create new forms that you wouldn't otherwise see."

In Murphy's work you don't see the sweat and you don't smell it, either. She's trying to get at the truth in a manner that is thoughtful rather than down and dirty.

"Truth is a real issue, in fiction and in life. Fiction is a way, for me, of figuring out what the truth is. By the time I've finished a story I've hopefully figured out what the truth is, the truth I'm exploring."

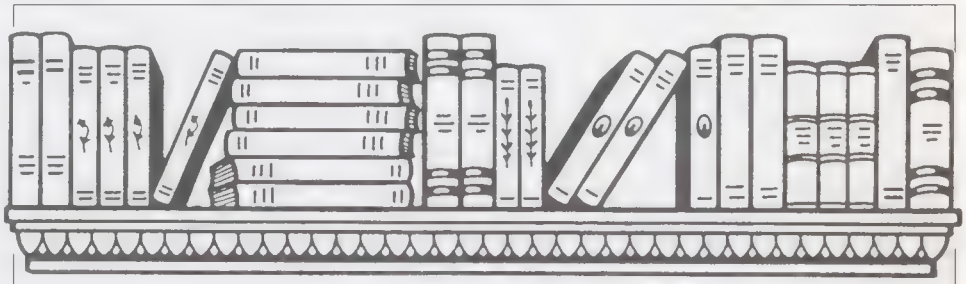
And once she has a feel for the truth she wants to share it, the ultimate reality for any writer. *"There's the impulse to change the way people think about things. Something that I realized while I was in high school and reading a lot of Robert Heinlein, was that a character in a story doesn't necessarily tell the truth. Before that I'd always accepted anything the author wrote as being truth; but I suddenly realized that this author was telling things from his perspective, and in my perspective what Heinlein was saying was a lie. That was when I realized the power of fiction — to say that this is the way the world is and to get the reader to go along with it. I have to admit that there's a sneaky part of me that wants to get people to think about the world in the way I do — not in my didactic or political fashion, but I know I don't think about the world the way my parents did. By writing fiction I can sway people to my way of thinking in a very insidious way."*

❧

DEBORA HILL and SANDRA BRANDENBURG are both natives of Northern California and were born in the same year, 1961. They have known one another longer than they are willing to remember and attended school and college together. They remained friends afterwards and are reluctant to face the fact that they will turn thirty this year (Sandra is quick to point out that Debora will do so three months before she will).

Debora began interviewing people in the music industry in 1977, and her book, Cuts From a San Francisco Rock Journal, was published in 1982. Debora and Sandra began writing together in 1988 and are currently working on a four-volume fantasy series. They began interviewing authors in the fall of 1990 and discovered they make better subjects than rock singers (and skinheads, Sandra adds).

The opinions expressed by the interviewers and interviewees are not necessarily those of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *FANTASY Magazine*.



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Artwork by Rob Alexander

Breaking Point

by Winifred Phillips

Susan was jolted out of her bed that night by a scream of what could only be mortal terror. She lurched upright and blinked blearily into the corners of her darkened college dormitory, then stumbled across the room, leaned over the bed against the far wall, and shook its occupant awake.

"Christine? Christine, wake up. You're having a nightmare. Christine!"

In the dim light of the room Susan could make out the glint of Christine's eyes when they opened, her movement when she pushed herself upright. "What?" she muttered.

Susan groped for the desk lamp, found it, and turned it on. Christine pushed her straight brown hair back from her eyes and squinted at Susan. "Oh, Susan. Did I wake you?"

Susan sat on the edge of the bed and let out a long breath, trying to relax. "Yes, but I guess it's all right." Christine drew her legs up to her chest and rested her head on her knees, her hair falling over her face. Susan noticed suddenly how small Christine was. "You've got to do something about this, Christine. It's every night now. It's getting hard to be your roommate."

Christine didn't move. "Is it?"

Susan shifted uncomfortably, averted her eyes to the window at the far corner of the room. It was a very dark night. No moon. No stars. Just black. "Oh, don't worry about it." She shrugged. "If I were still in my first year of college, I'd be screaming, too." She turned back to see if Christine had caught the joke, and saw her leaning back against the headboard, massaging her temples with her palms and staring at the ceiling.

Susan stood up, and walked over to the window. "What was the dream about?"

"Nothing."

Susan turned back to her. "Oh, come on."

"I don't want to talk about it." Christine shifted down into the covers, and turned away from Susan. Susan looked at her back for a moment, frustrated, then turned her attention to the window.

"Oh." She looked out of the window, down to the street. Their dorm room was on the fifth floor. On a clear night, she could see most of the campus. That night, she only saw the black outlines of some of the taller buildings, outlined against a sky grey with clouds. "Well, it's going around," she said. "The girl next door has been getting really bad trips at night. I think her parents are going to have her see a therapist come summer."

"I know."

Susan turned back to Christine, surprised. "I didn't know you knew her." Christine turned over and looked at Susan with eyes only a little darker than the circles around them. "How are you doing, Christine?"

"I'm fine."

Susan leaned back against the wall. "Christine, I've been meaning to confess something to you."

Christine closed her eyes. "What is it?"

"Last night, I was cleaning the room...and I found this letter from your mother..."

Christine sat up. "You didn't read it?"

Susan looked at the floor. "I did."

"You shouldn't have." Christine's voice had a resigned quality to it, as if she were expecting the answer she got. Susan walked over and knelt by the bed, met Christine's eyes. "She was really messed up, Christine. She was telling you to stay away *for good*. I mean, she was calling you *unnatural* or something. It really stinks."

"I don't care."

"That's good. I would have burned her letter and then broken everything in sight."

Christine's eyes had a shine in them that Susan couldn't identify. Was it anger? Tears?

"Don't read any more of my letters, Susan."

"What's wrong lately, Christine? Come on, tell me. Was it that letter, 'cause I could really understand if it was. Come on, don't shut me out."

Christine turned over, pulled the covers almost over her head. "I'm tired, Susan. Good night."

"Don't do this to me, Christine. I thought we were friends."

Christine's reply was muffled from the covers. "We are. I just can't talk about it." She pulled the covers down enough so that Susan could see her eyes. "But, thanks for asking anyway."

Susan stood. "You won't tell me."

Christine buried herself again.

" 'Night, Susan."

Susan sighed, walked back to the night stand where their one lamp made a feeble attempt to break the gloom. "Well, I had to try." She reached to turn off the light. "Good night, Christine." Click, and the room was black.

The door to Doctor McKensie's office was tall, its dark wood beaten by age and long use. It seemed to shake like a drum when knocked upon, as Susan was doing. From within the room, Susan heard a coldly impersonal, "Come in." The door creaked its protest as she opened it.

Doctor McKensie sat behind her desk at the far end of the room, facing the door as if wanting to be ready for anyone who might come in. The room and herself were ideally matched; stoic and purposeful. There was no disorder. The room was sparsely furnished, but adequate. The woman was dressed in a dark brown dress suit, her black hair tightly bound at the nape of her neck, glasses pushed up against a face with no color.

"Can I talk to you, Doctor McKensie?" Susan began to be aware of the loud ticking of a clock that had seen better days, hanging on the wall behind Doctor McKensie's head. "I know I don't have an appointment."

McKensie's smile was friendly, and somehow cold. "Oh, don't worry about it, Susan. Come in." Susan closed the door after her and entered the room. The room was a real box. There was not a single window. It was almost claustrophobic.

McKensie gestured towards a folding chair on the opposite side of the desk. "Sit." Susan complied. McKensie went on. "Tell me what's on your mind. You look worried."

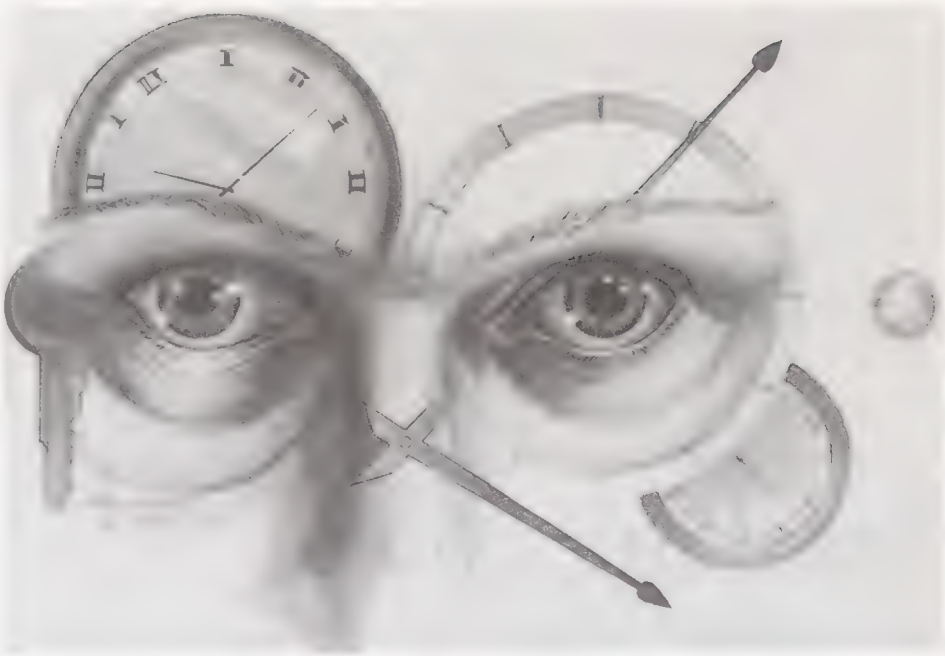
Susan was beginning to wish she hadn't come. "It's probably nothing..."

McKensie's smile widened a bit. Her tone was almost congenial. "Nothing is nothing. If it bothers you, it's something. Take my word, I'm a psychologist." She chuckled at her own joke. Susan tried to smile. "Okay? So tell me." She leaned in to her, as if looking at a specimen under a microscope. "Are your classes going all right?"

Susan shifted in the chair uncomfortably. "They're fine. This isn't about me."

Doctor McKensie leaned back in her chair, picked up a pen and began rolling it over in her hands absently. "Then, who?"

"It's Christine." McKensie suddenly froze, an odd expression on her face. She didn't look up. Susan stammered, "You know, Christine Simon."



Artwork by Rob Alexander

McKensie stared at the pen in her hand, not moving. Her voice was low. "What about her?"

The clock above McKensie's head continued its maddening tick. Susan wondered why the doctor put it where she couldn't see it. *Probably so other people could see how much of McKensie's time they were taking up.* She forced herself to keep talking. "Well, you know, she's my best friend, and I'm worried. She's acting differently."

McKensie continued to study the pen in her hand. "In what way?"

"Well, I mean, she was never really all that open. I mean, she wouldn't tell me that much. But at least she did talk to me. Now she doesn't. She isn't talking to anybody. I don't know...but I think she's just shut everyone out for good."

Susan saw the knuckles of the hand holding the pen grow white. McKensie must have seen as well, because she put the pen down quickly, clasped her hands on her lap, and looked at Susan. "Do you know why?"

"Not really. I'm her roommate, you know, but I don't really know anything more about her, well, than anyone else does. She gets these terrible headaches..."

McKensie blinked, suddenly intensely interested. "She does? When? Has she seen a doctor about it?"

"No. She gets then now almost every day." Susan wasn't enjoying being looked at the way McKensie was looking at her. She suddenly felt the need to explain the situation away, make it less important. "I think she's just stressed out. Her course load is incredible. But sometimes...oh, I don't know. I thought you would, seeing that you tutor her every day."

McKensie's expression was blank. "Uh,...tu...uh...tutor her?"

Susan was confused. "Yes. In psychology. Don't you?"

McKensie rested one of her hands on the table, staring at it and thinking. "Oh, uh, yes, yes, that's right."

"Do you know what's wrong?"

McKensie looked up at Susan, a smile affixed on her face. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Susan. I'll talk to Christine when next I, uh, tutor her."

Susan was beginning to feel lost. Nothing made sense. "Uh...do you have any ideas...?"

The bells in the steeple of the building took that moment to sound the hour. McKensie's office was right under the steeple, and the tolls shook the room like a cardboard box. McKensie sat, undisturbed. "There's the three o'clock bell. Don't you have a class, Susan?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then I wouldn't want to hold you up." McKensie stood. "Don't worry about Christine. *I'll* handle it. I'll see you tomorrow in class."

Susan stood, turned, opened the door, turned back. "Oh, but, uh..."

McKensie's tone was firm. "See you tomorrow."

Susan found herself out of the office, walking down the hallway with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, the

conversation rolling around in her brain. *Thank you for bring this to my attention, Susan. Don't worry about Christine, I'll handle it.* Handle what? What was she going to do? *I'll handle it.*

"So, how'd it go?"

A few paces down the hallway stood a tall, lean young man with carrot-colored hair and mischievous blue eyes, leaning against the wall. Susan hurried to close the distance between them, eager for company.

"I don't know, Mark, it was really weird."

Mark fell in beside her, and they started walking down the hallway, their footsteps echoing off the high ceiling. "Weird?"

"I told her about Christine, and she acted really interested. Then as soon as I asked her if she knew what was wrong, she threw me out of there."

Mark shrugged. "Maybe she had somewhere to go."

Susan shook her head. "I don't think so. She just wanted me out of there."

Mark put an arm around Susan's shoulders. "Whatever. You feel better?"

Susan sighed. "I don't know how much good I did."

"You did all you could do, Susan. Don't worry about it."

Susan shivered. "That's what she said." *Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Susan. Don't worry about Christine. I'll handle it.* What was she going to do?

Mark stepped in Susan's path, all pomp and grandeur. "Your humanistic charities shall be greatly rewarded."

A smile crept into Susan's face. "How, oh Great One?"

"You shall accompany the Great One to the dance tonight." The confidence left his face. "All right?"

Susan grinned. "Well, maybe I have other plans."

"How could your other plans not include me?"

"Very easily."

Mark staggered back, his hand over his heart. "Ah! You kill me!" They both laughed. "It wouldn't be any fun without you."

"How can I resist the Great One?"

"Never! Mark and his lady Susan shall attend the revels and shake their booties till they can't shake them no more!!"

The figure that walked down the same hallway through which Susan had just passed was slender, with dark hair hanging about drooping shoulders and dark eyes staring at the floor. She approached the same door and entered without knocking.

"Hi, Doctor McKensie," she muttered as she entered.

McKensie stood behind her desk, attempting to be as stern as possible. "You've been telling people about the experiment, Christine."

Christine closed the door behind her. "No, I haven't."

"Your friend Susan seems to know."

The girl leaned up against the door for a moment, then turned to her. "She's my roommate. She asked me. I had to tell her something. So I told her you were tutoring me."

McKensie crossed around her desk, faced the girl. "You shouldn't have mentioned me at all. Christine, you know I don't want this to get out until I've been published."

The girl sighed. "I know." She turned, took a few steps away from McKensie and stopped. "Susan told you about my headaches," she said to the wall, with a certainty that annoyed McKensie and made her uneasy at the same time.

"Yes. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't seem important."

McKensie walked back to her desk. "She said you've been down lately."

"Doesn't matter." The girl turned back to McKensie. She was such a weak little thing, and weakness annoyed McKensie. The girl said, "Let's just get on with the cards, okay?"

McKensie sat at her desk, opened a drawer and produced a deck of large, white cards which she shuffled. Christine sat on the folding chair opposite her, staring up at the clock as it ticked out seconds. McKensie placed the cards face down on the table and put a yellow pad of paper by her right hand. With her left hand, she picked up a card.

"You can't see what's on it?" she said, with the boredom caused by daily repetition.

The girl continued to stare at the clock, listening to its tick. "No, I can't," she said absently.

McKensie glanced at the figure on the card and said, "What is this?"

"A star," the girl replied, a hand going up to her temple, not looking away from the clock.

McKensie marked one correct on her pad of paper, put the card down, replaced it with another.

Tick! Tick! Tick! Tick!...

"Is it school? Is that what's bothering you?"

The girl continued to massage her temple. "It doesn't matter. A square."

McKensie saw out of the corner of her eye that it was indeed a square, marked another correct.

"They're in your car."

"What?" McKensie said absently.

"The keys to your filing cabinet."

McKensie looked at Christine, uneasy. Christine went on. "You were looking for them this morning so you could reread my case history." She looked at the floor. "Case of the psychic freak. You dropped them in the trunk last night."

McKensie gripped the edge of the desk, trying not to be disturbed even though she already was. "*Don't do that.*"

Christine looked at her with eyes so dark she could see her reflection in them. "What? Read your mind? You like it when I read minds, it's going to get you your Nobel Prize or whatever."

"*Just don't.*"

There was no feeling in the girl's voice as she said, "Oh, I'm okay as long as I'm your laboratory rat, is that it?"

McKensie felt the need to regain control of the situation. "What is with you today, Christine?"

"Everybody. That's all." Christine put her hands over her eyes, rubbed them. "There's somebody in the room next to mine that keeps having these nightmares. They wake me up every night. And I know there's somebody on campus doing drugs somewhere, and that gets to me, too." McKensie stood, leaned against the wall, needing to distance herself. For the first time, she felt the claustrophobia of the room.

Christine went on. "I don't even know who I am, sometimes. I hate it. Damned headaches." She laughed, with no humor. "How in the world am I supposed to concentrate on school when I've got all these other people in my mind?"

"Uh...how did you...uh, deal with it before?"

Christine looked at her. "I didn't before. I was never this way, before. You've got me practicing every day. When you get the keys out of your car and you read my history, you'll see. I keep getting better at this stuff." She turned her attention back to the clock on the wall, sparing McKensie from *those eyes.*

McKensie took refuge behind her desk once more and took a deep breath. "Christine, I'm on your side. I want to make your life better for you. I want to help you be accepted *by your mother.*" Christine froze. McKensie relaxed a little more. "But you have got to work with me. Then we both get what we want. That was the agreement, remember?"

The girl's eyes filled up with tears. "Tell me what to do, then."

McKensie folded her hands on her desk. "This is just another kind of stress, as far as I can see. Psychologists spend a lot of time thinking about stress, and studies have shown..."

"So what should I do?"

McKensie grimaced. *The girl would have to make things difficult, wouldn't she?*

"I...I can tell you what I do, when a lot of things are bothering me. I just...keep myself busy. Then it all goes away. All the stress, the bad feelings. They just...go away."

There was a long pause, punctuated only by the ticking of the clock.

"So...I should just...send it away?"

Tick! Tick! Tick!...

McKensie sighed. "You can think of it that way."

The girl leaned forward, intense. "And when I feel like jumping out of a window, all I have to do is just send it away and everything will be better?"

Tick! Tick! Tick!...

McKensie started in shock. "Oh, come on. You're overreacting, Christine."

The girl stared at her, intense, with *those eyes*. "And everything will be better? Won't it?"

McKensie stammered, "You, you just keep busy, and the stress goes away. Okay?"

Tick! Tick!...

Christine's eyes turned away from McKensie, took on an inward look that McKensie had never seen before. Her voice had a dreamy quality to it as she said, "...and it goes away...okay..."

"Do you feel better now, Christine?"

The girl smiled. "Yes. Yes, I think I do."

"Hey, Susan, are you ready to dance?"

Mark stood outside the door to Susan's dorm room, having knocked once. When nothing happened, he turned the knob, found the door unlocked, and walked in. "Susan?" Sitting on an old armchair in the corner was Susan, fast asleep, her jacket pulled over her shoulders. Mark stood for a moment watching her, then shook her awake. "Susan, wake up."

Susan pushed her hair away from her eyes, squinted up at him. "What?"

Mark grinned. "It's me. Remember? The dance?"

Susan looked confused for a moment, then comprehension dawned, and with that, a sheepish look. "Oh. Oh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." She pushed herself out of the chair. "I *did* remember, but I must have gotten ready too early. I fell asleep. You forgive me?"

Mark's grin softened a little. "Sure. Did you dream about me?"

Susan shivered. "No. Wish I had. Really weird, awful dream." She walked across the room to the wall mirror beside the door. Mark followed her, watched her look at herself in the mirror. She was all misty-complexioned and fair-haired, like someone in a commercial for floral perfume. She stared at herself for a moment with an expression Mark did not recognize, as if puzzled by her own appearance, then glowered at herself.

"Let me just run a brush through my hair so I don't look like a wild woman from Borneo, and then we can take off."

She walked back to the bed, fumbled in a drawer, produced a brush, and began attacking her hair fiercely. Mark took the moment to swing a lazy glance across the room. "Where's Christine?"

"She's with Doctor McKensie. They're having a late night."

"This late?" He leaned against the wall. "How much tutoring could she need?"

"I guess a lot."

Mark shook his head. "I never had a teacher that gave me *that* much time, you know?"

Susan finished with her hair, put the brush down, and stood for a moment, one hand massaging her right temple. "Do you have anything like...aspirin...or anything like that on you, Mark?" she asked, staring at the floor.

Mark looked at Susan more closely. She didn't look normal. She wasn't acting normal. She wasn't usually this low-keyed. "You getting a cold?"

"No. Headache."

"Sorry."

Susan crossed back to him. "I'm ready."

Mark grinned at her, hoping she'd catch the spirit. "All right, shall we party hearty?"

Susan only smiled. "Let's go."

It was another cloudy night, the kind that made Susan wish for morning. She wasn't looking forward to this dance. She came to the realization with only a little surprise. Where was her spirit? *Buried*. The thought came unbidden.

She hated the school. That realization hit Susan with a little more shock value. What was the matter with her? She loved the school. It was a good school, and it had Mark, didn't it? Wasn't Mark important? *No.*

She looked over at Mark, walking beside her, and saw him staring at her. He looked away quickly, but she had seen him. *What's he staring at me for. Doesn't he have anything better to do?* Where were all these thoughts coming from? He was worried about her, that's all.

By the time they reached the dormitory where the party was being held, Susan was more than a little disoriented. Her thoughts were wandering all over the map, and very seldom did they make sense. She let Mark lead her to the broken-down hulk of a building, through the cramped hallway of cinder-block walls that reminded her of a subway, through a door and into a crowd of maniacs. All were bouncing wildly to the beat of music pumped up to deafening proportions to compete with the din of the crowd. It was stifling.

Mark was peering over the crowd, searching for someone. "Hey, Hector!"

Mark could make out a dark head liberally doused with hair spray, the shine of gold chains about his neck. The head looked in Mark's direction, its voice a booming drawl over the noise. "*MARK!! MY MAN!!*""

The figure put his arms over his head, doing a strange little hopping dance in order to squeeze through the gyrating mass of bodies. The figure made his way to Mark's side, looked Susan up and down. "And *who* is *this*?"

Mark put an arm around Susan's shoulders meaningfully. Susan stood under his arm, looking down. Mark turned to Hector. "This is Susan."

A girl was anxiously tugging at one of Hector's sleeves, bouncing up and down in time, pulling him back into the crowd. He called back to them, as he went, "Help yourselves to the munchies over there, when you feel like it!"

"It's really crowded in here, Mark," Susan said to the floor.

Mark leaned in, tried to see her face. "Do you mind?"

Susan looked back at the door. "Yeah."

Mark stood, surprised. "You never did before."

The music picked up another beat, and Hector once more wriggled out of the crowd. "Susan, is it?"

Susan didn't look away from the door. "Sometimes."

"What are you majoring in?"

"I don't know yet."

Mark stared at her, confused. "Come on, Susan."

He turned to Hector. "She's majoring in political science, with a minor in psychology." Mark turned back to Susan. She had both hands up to her forehead.

"Be straight with Hector, he's a good guy."

Susan didn't look up. Her voice seemed to be thinning out, becoming desperate. "But I don't know yet. If Doctor McKensie's experiment works out, I may have to leave next year."

Mark's mind went blank for a moment, unable to place anything Susan had just said. *"What?"*

A group of people squeezed into the room. Hector said, "We've got more party-people. I'll see you later, Mark." He stared at Susan a moment, shot mark a puzzled look. Mark just shrugged, his mind still whirling, and Hector plunged into the crowd.

Susan's voice had a more persistent tone. "It's *really crowded* in here, Mark."

Mark stood for a moment, absently shaking his head at the floor. "What did you say?...about an experiment...and leaving...?"

Susan shifted her weight uncomfortably. "I don't remember." She started walking towards the door. "Let's go, *please*?"

Mark took her arm, made her look at him. *"What's going on, Susan?"*

Susan's expression was one of desperation. "I don't know. I've just got to get out of here."

Susan broke away, stumbled to the door.

"Susan!" Mark saw Susan go through the door and out. From the corner of his eye, Mark saw Hector making his way over, a questioning expression on his face.

Mark kept his eyes trained on the door as Hector fell in at his side. "Hector, I've got to go. There's something up with Susan."

"Need help?"

"I don't know."

Mark felt Hector's hand on his shoulder. "Just yell if you do."

Mark stood in the doorway, saw Susan sitting on the floor in the hallway, back against the wall, legs pulled up to her chest, head resting against her knees. He walked to her, sat down beside her. "Susan," he said, gently. "Susan, what's wrong?"

Susan didn't look up. Her voice was choked as she said, "I can't sleep. And I can't think. And Doctor McKensie talks to me like she *owns* me. And I'm tired of having to go to her every day."

Mark shook his head, confused. "You don't go to her every day. Christine does." He took her chin in his hands so he could see her eyes. They were filled with tears. Mark's insides seemed to turn over in strange ways. He swallowed hard. "Susan, *what's wrong?*"

"Everything." She moved away from him, stood. Mark pushed himself up, reeling in confusion. Susan put her forehead to the wall. "I'm tired." Her voice was very small. "I'm so damned *tired*. Why doesn't everyone just leave me alone?"

Mark's voice was almost a whisper. "I really want to help you, Susan, but you're not making any sense."

Susan turned, leaned back against the wall, arms clamped over her stomach. "My mother thinks I'm a *freak*. She wanted to send me away, hell, all the way across the damned country."

It was starting to be too much for Mark to handle. "But she lives twenty minutes from here."

Artwork by Rob Alexander

Susan took a step back from the wall, stared at him, her eyes shining with tears and with something else, something that suddenly made Mark uneasy. *"She doesn't.* And *she hates me.* And I just can't make it. I'm gonna get kicked out of school, I know it. I don't know what to do."

Susan's frame was shaken by sobs. It was too much for Mark. "Susan, you get STRAIGHT As. Are you *trying* to blow my mind? IS THAT IT?!"

"You don't know. You don't know anything."

"Then *tell me!*"

Susan's expression was agonized. "I *can't*. I promised Doctor McKensie."

"You didn't promise her anything. *That's all Christine.* Why are you so *obsessed* with her?"

"Doctor McKensie said all I had to do was send it all away and I'd be better. But I'm *not* better. I'm *not better*!"

Susan ran down the hallway.

"Susan?! Susan, WHERE ARE YOU GOING?!"

McKensie's phone was ringing. She let it ring, hoping whoever it was would hang up. After the sixth ring, she got up out of her easy chair, where she had been reading the girl's case history. The girl had been right, her ability rating was getting higher. The knowledge left McKensie with an uneasy feeling, which meant she was testy.

The girl herself was staring out the window distractedly. McKensie had driven her over that night, saying she wanted to conduct more tests. She had really wanted to get the situation more under her control. The girl seemed to be slipping away, becoming too independent. However, that night she seemed peaceful and compliant.

She picked up the phone, said, "Hello?" with just the right amount of professional annoyance.

"Doctor McKensie? This is Mark Hathoway. I need to ask you something."

It would have to be a student, calling her at home, wouldn't it? "My office hours are Mondays and..."

"It can't wait for your office hours. It's Susan."

Oh, yes, the girl's roommate. "Oh. Uh, all right. Uh, what about Susan?"

"She's really upset. I think she thinks she's Christine or something." McKensie froze, a knot forming at the pit of her stomach. The student went on. "She keeps talking about an experiment and being a freak, and..."

"What experiment?" McKensie hissed.

The student sounded taken aback by McKensie's reaction. "I don't kno w. She wouldn't say."

McKensie forced herself to sound more natural. "Well, good, I...wouldn't want Susan to be suffering from delusions. Many nervous breakdowns occur on college campuses."

"I don't know. I'm really scared for her, Doctor McKensie. I need help."

"I could see her next Tuesday..."

"I need help *now*. Or else I don't know if she's gonna *be* here next Tuesday."

"Oh, uh,...I'm here with Christine, and..."

The student cut her off, anxious. "Good. Could you ask her to come? Since Susan keeps talking about her and all..."

McKensie tried to sound firm. "I hadn't planned..."

"Please?"

McKensie sighed. "Uh, Where shall I meet you?"

"Susan's dorm. That's Tyler House, room 503."

"I can't stay long, but I'll come."

McKensie hung up.

For the second time that day, Mark was standing outside Susan's dorm room, knocking and getting no response. He knocked one more time, then tried the door. It opened. He peered into the dark room. "Susan?"

There was a dark silhouette sitting on the window sill, the window open, blowing chill gusts into the room. For a moment, Mark couldn't tell if it was Susan or Christine. Then the figure spoke with Susan's voice. "Go away."

"What are you doing?"

In the dark he could barely make out the glint of her eyes as she stared back at him. "What does it look like?"

Mark stood, in shock. This was not the Susan he knew. Not by a long shot. Oh, no. "This is stupid. Come on, Susan, you're playing a joke on me. Trying to make me think you'd actually jump out of the window. I don't buy it. You wouldn't do that." *Please say I'm right, please just laugh like it's all a joke and then we can go back to the real world, because this can't be real.*

"I wouldn't..." Her tone was ambiguous. Was it sarcasm? A statement? A question?

"Come down from there, you're scaring me."

She turned to stare down out of the window. "No."

"Susan!"

Her head whipped around to glare at him. "What?!"

"Tell me what's going on!"

"I don't know what's going on."

Mark took a deep breath, tried to be calm and reasonable. "Come on. Look, I told you everything, about wrecking my father's car and all. Stuff I'd only tell you. You remember."

Susan turned her attention back to the window. "You never told me that."

Mark was growing desperate for the real world. "Come *on*. You remember, on that day we went to the beach." *Please remember.*

"I don't remember."

"Come on, Susan."

Mark heard footsteps coming down the hall, heard Doctor McKensie's voice in the hall. "Mark, are you th—" she trailed off, standing in the doorway, seeing what was happening. Her voice took on a careful, artificial quality. "Oh. Hello, Susan. Why don't you come down off that ledge and we'll sort all of this out."

Mark turned to stare at McKensie. *What an incredibly patronizing thing to say. Why did I call her?* Then another figure pushed past McKensie, and suddenly Christine was standing in the room, staring at Susan. There was a strange mixture of compassion and dread on her face. "Oh, no." she whispered.

Mark turned back to Susan, still staring out the window. "Susan, it's Doctor McKensie." Nothing registered on Susan's face. Mark tried harder. "You were talking about her before?" Still nothing. Mark turned back to McKensie, lost and frustrated. "Now she won't say *anything*. I don't know what to do. She was talking before about experiments and her mother being across the country, and well, like she was you, Christine." He turned to Christine, but she was only looking at Susan.

McKensie seemed to be extremely uncomfortable, floundering for something, anything to say. "Don't believe a word of it, Mark." She trailed off, her eyes darting here and there like a cat chasing a mosquito. "It's, uh, it's well known...that, uh, suicidal persons make up stories for attention."

Christine turned sharply to McKensie, hatred written on her face. "It's not made up and you know it."

McKensie matched Christine's hatred with the full force of her own. "Christine, we wouldn't want Mark *getting the wrong idea, would we?*"

Christine walked over to Susan, knelt down next to her, speaking ever so gently. "Do you have a headache, Susan?"

Susan's voice sounded like a child's. "Yes."

Christine nodded, smiled gently. "Susan, tell me about Doctor McKensie's keys. Susan, you remember, from this afternoon when I told her about it."

"She thought she lost them, but she dropped them in the trunk of her car." Mark looked from Susan to Christine to Susan, not able to understand anything that was happening. He threw a questioning glance McKensie's way, but she was glaring at the two girls.

Susan's tone was pleading. "How do I know that, Christine? Please, help me."

McKensie stepped forward, fixed Christine with a stern gaze. "Christine, let me handle this. This could be a real breakthrough, and you're not qualified. Leave it to me."

Christine looked at McKensie only long enough to say, "Why? So you can mess her up the way you messed me up?" She turned back to Susan. "I'm sorry. I didn't know where it went when I let it go. I never meant it to go to you."

Mark took a step forward, suddenly frightened. "Christine, what's happening?"

Christine didn't look away from Susan. "I can't take it back, you know. I don't know how."

McKensie's self control seemed to be fading away. "Christine, *be quiet*. You're not trained. You don't know what you're doing."

Christine's voice held a conviction Mark had never heard in it before. "Oh, yes I do. I'm fixing what you started. Mark, Doctor McKensie has been conducting secret tests on me—"

McKensie's self control snapped. "Christine!!"

"—that she hasn't told the college about," Christine finished.

McKensie's laughter bordered on hysteria. "What nonsense are you saying, Christine?"

Christine leaned toward Susan. "Susan? Susan, can you hear me?"

"Christine?"

Christine nodded. "Yes. Susan, I'm going to make it right. Just hold on, and I'll make it right."

Mark backed away a step. His voice

was shaking, out of control. Something was going to happen. He knew it. Something. "I don't understand any of this."

Christine was calm. "It's okay, Mark. *I'll fix it.*"

McKensie's voice was biting, hard and mean. There were no false smiles, no facades. This was the real Doctor McKensie. "What about *your mother*, Christine? Don't you want her to be *proud of you?* That's what this whole experiment was for. Remember, *the agreement*."

Christine's face was hard to look at, too peaceful, and too full of purpose. "I can't take it back, Susan, but I can send it to someone else."

McKensie's voice pounded mercilessly. "If you abandon the project, she'll never think you're anything more than a *freak*!"

Christine was shaking her head, unmoved. "You don't deserve this, Susan."

"If you do this," McKensie pushed, *"she'll be ashamed of you!"*

"No," Christine went on. "You don't deserve this, Susan. All the hatred. The frustration. The *wanting to die.* You don't deserve it." Christine turned and looked at Doctor McKensie. "But I think I know who does. Yes. I know who does."

Christine's eyes were shining a little too brightly for the light in the room. Mark backed up against the wall, away from *those eyes*. But they weren't turned on him. They were turned on Doctor McKensie, and she was standing very still, shaking her head in slow horror.

Her voice was soft. "No. No, not after all I've done for you..."

Christine's voice was too peaceful to be so frightening. "I know who does," she repeated.

McKensie's voice was rising. "You can't do this to me. Christine? Christine? Christine!! CHRISTINE!!!"

And suddenly Doctor McKensie was screaming, and Susan was sliding off the ledge, and Mark, pinned up against the wall, could only stare helplessly into Christine's face, a cold smile touching her lips and the agonized form of Doctor McKensie mirrored in her eyes.

❧

WINIFRED PHILLIPS made her debut as a playwright at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where her radio play "Light of Truth" was performed and broadcast live over National Public Radio. She is also the composer of theme music for television shows that featured President George Bush and New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean. In addition, she has written material for cable television ranging from documentaries to musicals. This is her first appearance in *FANTASY Magazine*. She lives in New Jersey.

ROB ALEXANDER is a talented newcomer from Seattle. You will see his work again soon in these pages.

Merle S. Insinga

Letters

RING AROUND THE SCHOLAR

Jena L. Bartlett, Laconia, NH

I had been reading issue #9...and came across the "Scholar MeLinda" letter (suggesting inclusion of scholarly articles and fantasy book reviews)...Thank you for your "No!" to making over MZBFM into one more nose-in-the-air literary review.

You're welcome. FANTASY readers want fantasy stories, and I intend to keep printing 'em! –MZB

NO RESPECT?

Douglas Lent, Wareham, MA

...As for the issue Michael Burke raises about an anti-male bias in some of the stories you publish, I believe he does have a point. I have noticed a tendency for males to 'get no respect' in several of the tales published in the magazine, and in some cases I have found it a bit disturbing. However, I did and do not believe these are any evidence of an editorial desire to "male-bash" in the stories it publishes...I believe that a good number of such stories where a "good" woman defeats a "bad" man are not meant as some kind of feminist propaganda, but are rather just the way those writers chose to tell their stories and could just as easily have had different genders for the "hero" and "villain". While an occasional story that was written to be specifically "anti-male" might slip through into print, the editors have been quite clear in all their comments on this matter...that they find ALL prejudice distasteful, regardless of the target. I have yet to see that this policy has been deviated from, and will not be overly worried about it until I do.

Right. And we have stoutly resisted the suggestion that we send blue rejection slips to males, pink to females, and beige to initials and pseudonyms. –MZB

MZB A FEMINIST???

Patrick Lawless, Kansas City, MO

...I would say that if there is a "growing, mostly wrong-headed perception that MZB is a feminist" it should not be too surprising. After all, she edits the Sword and Sorceress books, and going by the ads for them, they seem to feature only female protagonists. Since those are the kinds of stories that appear in the books she edits, many people may be assuming that that is also the type of story she wants for the magazine. But as far as Michael Burke's comment about the "continual denigration of males", that isn't something I've noticed...

Thanks for your letter. We try very hard to avoid anti- or pro-feminist stories in the FANTASY Magazine. I allow a little more feminism in the S & S anthologies because sword and sorcery fiction was the last bastion of male sexism, and I'm still trying to balance things somewhat. –MZB

MAGNA CUM OULOUD

Christopher Larsen, Elmwood Park, IL

I've gone back (and) looked more carefully over the Ouloud cover on issue #8 from Jo Clayton's CHANGES, and while I wouldn't rate it as the greatest artwork ever to have graced the cover of MZBFM (there I'd have to name issues #1, #6, and #11), I find it entirely adequate and fail to perceive what all the fuss is about.

That about covers it. –MZB

SOUR GRAPES

Anonymous (written on Cauldron ballot)

Are (sic) one of you related to this writer [Micole Sudberg]? You keep promoting her over more talented writers.

No — neither of us have ever met her; but we like her stories a lot, and so do many of our readers. By the way — accusing Micole of having less talent because YOU don't like her stories is rather presumptuous. And accusing Rachel and me of favoritism doesn't win you any points, either. –MZB

REJECTIONS AIN'T ALL BAD

Greg Koster, Tacoma, WA

I've just received your rejections of my stories...I know it is rather unusual to thank an editor for rejecting stories, but I would like to do so anyway. The courtesy was exceptional, and I appreciate the format/requirement circular you sent along with them...What I really want to thank you for is the speedy response...it gives me confidence you are running a professional shop, with no wasted effort.

Some people insist I shouldn't comment on stories, just accept or reject them; but I try to respond the way I would want an editor to respond to me. Besides, it saves you — and me — a lot of time in the long run. Usually, my rejections mean "I can't use this right now, try again." But, with your courteous and professional attitude, I'm sure you know that. –MZB

PRAISE FOR L'ENGLE

L. E. Wilson, Elmhurst, IL

Issue #12 was very fine, and I especially liked Madeleine L'Engle's story ("The Connecticut Eskimo")...I also appreciated your "Talks to Writers" — have you ever read Shirley Jackson's essay on how to be a writer? I think it's included in Come Along With Me...the only part I can recall right now is her adage that, if one's heroine has blonde hair, to call it "yellow"...

We liked Madeleine's story, too. In fact, I'm surprised it didn't win the Cauldron, although it received a good number of first-place votes (no 2nds or 3rds). Just goes to show I'm not infallible. Incidentally — is it true "yellows" have more fun? –MZB

FANTASY VS. THE REAL ARTICLE

Sherrilyn Kenyon, Richmond, VA

After reading several issues of your magazine, I have finally gathered up enough courage to submit one of my short stories to you. It seems strange to me, that I am shy about something so trivial, especially since I've had articles published in *Bride's, Seventeen,* and *Singles.* I suppose the difference is in the subject matter. With articles, it's easy to hide feelings behind an objective facade, whereas fiction seems to be a mimesis of the soul...

Oh, that is so true! But be brave — the monster Writing can be fed only with your own blood, so BLEED! You get used to it in time. And remember, rejection slips aren't the end of the world — if fact, they can open entirely new worlds for you (Darkover, Pern — the list is endless). –MZB

DREAM COMES TRUE

eluki bes shahar

I have just seen a copy of the cover for "Haut-Clare" that Kelly [Freas] did, and I have to tell you that it is completely magnificent — I am speechless (but not write-less) with delight. In one image he has captured the essence of the story in a way I would not have thought possible — and Brand and Clare (and their swordselves) look exactly like themselves. It's going to be a cover that gives people no peace until they've bought the magazine, and I am attempting reasonable patience in looking forward to the finished version.

Ever since I was eight years old and decided to be a science-fiction writer, I've had two touchstones — dreams that, if made real, would prove to me that I'd achieved what I set out to do. One of them, selling a story to John W. Campbell, is — alas — no longer do-able in this lifetime. You've made the other one come true.

This is why I love editing, and what makes it all worthwhile. –MZB

THUMBS UP/THUMBS DOWN

Francois Leclerc, Montreal, Quebec

I want to thank you for *MZB's Fantasy Magazine* and for the possibility it gives new and not-so-new writers of fantasy to see publication in magazines other than *Dragon* and *Fantasy and Science Fiction.* The magazine also allows readers to know what is being written now and to sample some very fine writers without having to buy complete books...

I am usually a great fan of George Barr's artwork, but I am disappointed by the cover of issue #12. It would do great as a children's book (cover), minus the devil, mind you, but falls short for an adult readership...I love the art of Alan Gutierrez for "Sunrise" and would greatly like to see more...

You're welcome, and you're right...there aren't that many markets for fantasy stories these days, which probably accounts for the huge number of manuscripts we get every week. I'm sorry you didn't like the Barr cover, but we can't please everybody, all the time. Keep reading, and thanks for your comments. –MZB

BEST ISSUE EVER

T.J. Stokes, Philadelphia, PA

Re: #12 — Best issue ever — no argument. Please extend my subscription (check enclosed) — I don't think it's "up" yet but this is intended as a vote of supreme confidence...

"Connecticut Eskimo" — utterly charming..."Suggestion" — magical..."Back to Basics" — just hilarious, rich and fun..."Name Price" — powerful and imaginative...

The illustrations are very fine; Barb Armata's black on white silhouettes with "Name Price" and Vincent DiFate's liberated motif for "Suggestion" especially.

A lot of the credit must go to Rachel, who waded into this with gusto and enthusiasm, and is doing a great job. We couldn't do the magazine without her! –MZB

MORE PRAISE...

Rima Saret

In reply to Karen Harbaugh's letter, in which she expressed concern that susceptible readers might take seriously the parody of romance writers in Mercedes Lackey's "Satanic, Versus...", allow me to note that's highly unlikely. How many people believe archaeologists are similar to Indiana Jones?

You mean, they're NOT??? –JAR

I'd like to thank Richard Sardinha for his illustration for my story...In addition...I must praise the illustrations of Shirley Jowise, Barb Armata, and (as always) George Barr. However, my favorite this time around is the lovely, wistful, evocative illustration by Alan Gutierrez for Leslie Ann Miller's "Sunrise". This poignant, humanistic piece is also my favorite story. However, it had stiff competition...

I'm looking forward to the next issue. Keep up the good work!

Thank you, thank you, thank you! We feel fortunate to have such talented artists and writers contributing to our magazine. –MZB

The Dark God's Gift

By Patricia Duffy Novak

Reelandor handed the jars, one by one, to young Arik who took them reverently and set them down carefully on the table. "They're not as fragile as all that," Reelandor said, giving the boy a gentle pat on the shoulder with his ungloved right hand. He seldom touched anyone with his left hand, even when it was gloved and harmless. "Even if you drop one, it's not the end of the world."

Arik's brown eyes were serious and large as he gazed at the healer. "I won't drop them."

Reelandor smiled down into the serious face of the heir of the Kingdom of Drith. By the Lady's mercy, the child was as unlike his father the king as the Lady herself was to the Dark God.

Arik took the last of the bottles from Reelandor's hands. "Shall I sweep off the shelf?"

"Heavens, no, child," the healer answered. "You are the Prince of Drith. You can't be doing a servant's work!"

"I want to be useful." The boy set the last jar on the table and carefully removed the top.

"And so you are, lad, so you are," Reelandor assured him. "Come and help me refill the bottles."

They worked together in companionable silence for a while, replenishing the healer's stock of dried herbs from barrels brought in from Calorn expressly for this purpose. The apothecary was brightly lit by the afternoon sun shining in through tall arched windows. A soft, warm breeze stirred the draperies. Reelandor hummed softly as he worked.

The blast of a trumpet, coming from somewhere in the yard, intruded on the quiet of the tower. Arik looked up eagerly. "Go and see what it is, boy," Reelandor said.

Arik raced to the window, opened it, and leaned out. "Oh, Reelandor, it's Captain Timon back from Heart!"

Reelandor, joining Arik at the window, looked out over the castle courtyard and saw, coming through the gate, a group of riders bearing the purple and black banners of the Westhaven regiment. As the riders dismounted and approached the castle, Reelandor could easily distinguish the captain whom Arik so admired. Timon was of the Na'hallen race, tall and lean, with the black hair of his people. He was easy to spot in the crowd of stocky, light-haired Su'hadren soldiers.

Timon, as if sensing himself observed, looked up towards the tower window and waved. "He sees us," Arik cried in delight, leaning farther out the window.

Reelandor grinned. "Better run along and greet him before you fall out and land on him."

Arik's face lit up with one of his rare smiles, but it faded quickly. "I promised to help you, Uncle." He used the familial term as a respectful endearment; Reelandor was no blood kin to the heir of Drith.

"Nonsense, lad. You've done quite a bit of work already. I'm nearly done. And it's not every day that a hero rides home. Go on and hear all about the campaign in Heart, and be sure you listen well so you can tell me about it, too. It's not seemly for one of my age and calling to listen to tales of war, but I profess to curiosity." Reelandor waved his right hand at the boy. "Run along now, child, or your cousins will hear all the stories first."

At that threat, the boy lost his hesitancy and ran off. Reelandor, returning alone to his work, thought of Timon, with his soldier's braid and sword, his men who followed him unthinking into battle. The warrior's way, the hero's path, was a straight and simple one. It was a way that had been denied Reelandor from the moment of his birth. He felt a brief and bitter stab of envy for the other man's life but quickly suppressed it. Reelandor knew he must make the best of his own choices.

He looked down at his hands. The right one, if he looked at it long enough, seemed to glow with an inward fire. It was a healer's hand, the gift of the Lady. His other hand, gloved and hidden, bore the sign of Nedral, the Dark God. Reelandor shuddered slightly as he remembered the terrible thing he had been forced to do when Nedral's gift had been put to the test. He had been a boy no older than Arik.

Reelandor looked away from the gloved reminder. He finished packing the herbs into the bottles without further thought along those lines.

Two weeks passed during which time

Reelandor did not see Arik. Then one morning, so early that Reelandor who habitually rose with the dawn was barely awake, the door of the tower room was thrust open and Arik ran in. The boy, out of breath and speechless, flung himself at Reelandor's knees.

"What is it, child?" Reelandor asked, but the boy did not answer him, only began to sob desperately. With a healer's awareness, Reelandor felt the heartbreak and horror with which the boy struggled, but Reelandor was not a Seer. He could not fathom the cause.

He knelt over the boy. "What happened?" he asked gently. Arik raised a tear-streaked face, but just as he seemed about to speak, the door was flung open again and King Haldmir himself strode into the room.

"Your Highness," Reelandor murmured, bowing. His heart beat faster in his chest. The king had never before come to the apothecary; when he had wished to see the healer, Reelandor had been summoned.

Haldmir grabbed Arik roughly by the shoulder and pulled the boy up from the floor. "You — " The king's face flushed an angry red. "Get out of the way or I will deal with you as I have dealt with your hero." He pushed the boy away and Arik ran, cringing, into the open herb pantry.

Haldmir's blue eyes were fever-bright as he turned his gaze on Reelandor. The madness, the soul sickness no mortal healer could alleviate, was upon him again. "You will do something for me," said the king. Then he turned towards the still open door. "Guards, bring him!"

Two guards entered, supporting between them an unconscious man. Timon, Reelandor realized in horror, it was Captain Timon they carried. He bent over the soldier's form. "He is ill?"

"Oh, indeed, he is ill," the king answered. "I want you to be sure he does not die yet."

Reelandor helped the guards settle the captain on a cot. The healer then passed his right hand lightly over the length of the unconscious man's body. "His back is broken," Reelandor said quietly. "It is a bad break. It is better that he never awaken. He will never walk nor use his arms again. I can do little to help him."

The king laughed; Reelandor's blood ran cold at the sound. "The job has been done well, then," Haldmir said. "You stare at me, Healer," he continued petulantly. "That is not polite. Am I not Lord of Drith? Shall I not reward a traitor as I see fit?"

"A traitor?" Reelandor heard his own voice shake.

"A traitor!" the king shrieked. "I know him for what he is. Na'hallen bastard, making himself popular, raising himself above his lot, trying to inspire his savage people to rally behind him in a mutiny. I will put an end to that! You will see that he does not die, that he lives on, helpless. And then, before his eyes, we shall torture to death a hundred of his accursed breed. Only then shall he die."

Reelandor gasped. He clenched his hands—uncovered right hand, gloved left — tightly across his chest. When he had run from the Askurian wilderness twenty years ago, he thought he had seen the end of cruelty and torture. In spite of Haldmir's periodic fits of madness, Drith had always seemed a civilized land. The king had done nothing this terrible before. Reelandor could neither speak nor reason as he stared at Haldmir's flushed face.

"Take care of him, Healer," Haldmir ordered. "See he does not die, or your own life may be forfeit. I will be back for him tomorrow." The king walked over to where Arik crouched. "Get up, you groveling weakling. That the Gods would give me such a son!" He hauled the boy to his feet and pushed him out of the room before him. The guards, who would not meet Reelandor's gaze, followed the king out of the tower.

Reelandor looked down at Timon's broken body. Could he, with clear conscience, let the man die? He was a healer, oath-sworn to preserving life. He knelt down beside the cot and went to work on the unconscious Timon, trying to revive and sustain him. He had to help him breathe, forcing the tired heart to keep beating.

Several hours later, Reelandor, exhausted and near fainting from exertion, felt the life force strengthen in the soldier. Timon would live, paralyzed, helpless, to see his friends tortured to death by the mad king. No matter what Timon had done, this was barbarous, worse even than anything Reelandor had seen among the Askurian bandits. Reelandor felt the blood-rage growing within himself, but knowing what the consequences of his own anger could be, he fought for control, for calm, and let his anger dissipate harmlessly.

Timon opened his eyes and stared into the face of the healer. Reelandor, still in light rapport with the injured man, could feel Timon's mental anguish. The soldier knew what the king had done to him. "Why?" Timon whispered.

Reelandor shook his head. "The king called you traitor."

The emerald eyes of the Na'hallen captain glistened with tears. "Never, never."

It was impossible to lie to a healer in rapport. He saw the truth of Timon's words, understood the depths of Haldmir's depravity. Jealous of his power, envious of Timon's acclaim, full of hatred for an alien race that had never harmed him, Haldmir, King of Drith, was exacting a terrible vengeance from an innocent man.

Timon stared helplessly at the healer. "Kill me," he whispered. Reelandor stared at the soldier. The green eyes full of anguish, the white face against the night-black hair, no longer seemed to belong to Timon. Past and present

merged. Reelandor lost his grip of time and saw another man, another green-eyed, dark-haired Na'hallen, tortured and broken by Askurian bandits; a man who had whispered those same words to Reelandor over twenty years ago.

Hardly knowing what he was doing, Reelandor rose up to his full height and stripped the glove from his left hand, revealing a nightmare. From the wrist down, the hand was covered in scales the color of blood. The nails were black glass claws. It was Nedral's hand, the left hand of the Dark God, the hand that could claim a mortal life. A sob was torn from Reelandor's throat as he raised the bloody hand of darkness and felt the power surge along his arm.

Never again, he had vowed never again to use Nedral's gift. Only one time before had he loosed the Dark God's power, taken a human life with a touch. He sobbed again, convulsively, as the force in his hand grew and he felt the power throbbing through his fingertips. "Kill me," Timon whispered again.

"Lady, forgive me!" Reelandor lowered the red-scaled hand toward the soldier. Timon died the instant he was touched. Reelandor collapsed sobbing on the floor.

Reelandor feared himself, what he might do, and sought a healing of his shattered vows in the halls of the Lady's dream kingdom. He saw, in a vision, the Lady of Mercy shrouded in dark robes that were netted with diamonds. He ran towards her, begging forgiveness. The Lady only raised a sorrowful face and would not speak. He fell at her feet, bowed his head, and prayed.

When he raised his eyes, the Lady was gone. Before him was Captain Timon, eyes like twin green flames, demanding death. Then Timon became the other, the first man Reelandor had killed. "Please kill me," the man begged, and the boy Reelandor had been could not stop himself from responding to that plea. He felt the touch, the first shock of awareness of the power that was his own; then he suffered the other's death. He had killed, as the Askurian bandits had wanted; he had taken a life.

The boy Reelandor had been was torn apart, mind from body, will from consciousness, in that moment of shock. The savage Askurians had brought him to this test hoping to make the sensitive boy into a hardened killer. If the child would unleash Nedral's power once, would he not do it again and again?

In the darkness of sleep, Reelandor, Healer of Drith, moaned aloud. He relived, in his dreams, the first great vision, the choice that had brought him along this twisted path. As he had on that awful night twenty years ago, Reelandor saw Nedral, Dark God of Death and Illusion. The God's face, too terrible for mortal eyes to see, was hidden behind a lacquer mask.

Nedral held out his human-looking right hand to the boy. In this hand, he held power. The boy saw himself, older, harder, an unconquerable warrior riding across the wilderness of Askuria, uniting the barbarian tribes into a strong and powerful nation. Then Reelandor saw himself and his legion of followers sweeping out of the mountains, down across the plains of Drith, until all the western lands lay under his control. Power, wealth, glory, all the world bowing in dread before Nedral's chosen son.

Reelandor did not clasp the Dark God's right hand to seal the contract; he could not. He stood paralyzed before Nedral, praying for an end to his own life. He would not become the dread lord of the vision.

As the boy stood waiting only for his own death, a light began to glow in the blackness behind Nedral. The light became a form, the form became a figure, and the boy saw a vision of the Lady of Mercy.

"I will claim this child, Nedral," she said. "He is not for you." The Lady's voice was like a wind harp. Her eyes were like vast calm lakes. "Take my hand, my son," the Lady said, "and accept the healer's ways."

Reelandor had not hesitated. He held out his right hand to the Lady. "You are mine now," she said. "You must not kill even in pity. The dark gift, once loosed, may corrupt you until you seek to use it again and again. Go to Drith, to my temple by the sea, and learn the discipline of my priests. Your path will be twisted and difficult. May you never regret your choice."

"Never, never, Lady," Reelandor said as the vision began to fade. He cried this aloud now, in his sleep, and the sound of his own voice woke him. He sat up, confused, disoriented, expecting to see around him the forests of Askuria, not recognizing the tower apothecary in which he had spent the last dozen years. Then his vision cleared and he remembered. "Oh, Lady, Lady," he cried. "I have betrayed you. What monster will I become?"

His left hand, red and deadly, lay curled in his lap. He knew he was not done killing. His vows were shattered beyond repair.

The next day the king returned, accompanied by Arik, who was pale and red-eyed. Haldmir glanced at the cot where Timon's body lay and turned to the healer with fury. "Dead?" he screamed. "I wanted him to live. Why did you let him die?"

Reelandor forced his lips into a smile. "It is an interesting story, my lord, one I'm sure you will enjoy. But first, I think you should send the boy from the tower. It's not for his hearing."

Arik looked questioningly at the healer, but Reelandor carefully avoided his gaze. "My son stays," bellowed the king. "He is coddled too much. Let him hear what a man should hear."

"Arik, if you love me, leave this room," Reelandor said, still not looking the boy in the eyes.

"You will stay, boy," his father ordered, but it was too late; the boy had already scurried away.

"You had better have an explanation for such insolence and for the traitor's death, or I will bury you both in the same grave." The king's voice rose in hysteria. Sweat beaded on his brow.

Reelandor smiled again and raised his gloved left hand before the king's face. "You have often wondered, my Lord, why I cover my left hand. I have told you only that my vows require it. But today I will show you why I alone of all the Lady's priests wear a glove."

Reelandor slowly drew off the glove, revealing to the king the true nature of his left hand. Haldmir gasped. "Nedral's gift," Reelandor explained. "A rare gift. Only once in a thousand years is a child marked by the Dark God's favor. I was such a child."

Haldmir drew away from the healer, fear showing on his face. "Afraid of a healer, my Lord?" Reelandor asked, pursuing him, bringing the blood-colored hand to within inches of Haldmir's face. "Afraid of one sworn to do no harm?" Reelandor laughed. "My vows would have protected you from my anger, would have saved your miserable life. But look, my lord," Reelandor pointed at the body on the cot, "look what I was brought to do. Out of pity, I took his life and unleashed the gift I have hidden all these years. Shall I hesitate to kill again?"

Haldmir backed nervously towards the door. Reelandor followed. "Leaving, my lord? I think not." Reelandor pointed his

left hand towards the king and the man fell quivering to his knees, unable to move.

"Reelandor, don't be a fool," Haldmir whispered. "I'll give you anything you want, anything. With such power, I will make you a great Lord. We will conquer — oh!" The king's words broke off suddenly, and he writhed in pain as Reelandor twisted his hand in the air.

"I want nothing of yours." Reelandor advanced slowly towards the king. The dark power throbbed in his hand.

"Think of Arik," Haldmir whispered, eyes wide, staring at the red hand. "You must not deprive him of his father."

"It is for Arik's sake that I must kill you. He is a gentle boy. You will take him and break him to your own depravity. I will not allow it." Reelandor raised his left arm high; power surged along it.

"My soul is damned forever," Reelandor said and brought the hand down swiftly, like a sword, to sever the life of the kneeling king. Haldmir screamed, but only briefly; he fell dead upon the cold stone floor the moment Reelandor's hand touched his brow. There was one more life to be claimed, Reelandor knew, his own. What he had unleashed must not be allowed its freedom. He must not become the man in the dark vision, feared and hated, a conquering murderer. He raised his arm again, gathering the power he would need to take his own life.

"Uncle, no!" Reelandor heard a voice behind him, turned and saw young Arik crouching in the doorway. He had seen his father's death, Reelandor realized with remorse; he had wanted to spare the boy from it. He raised his hand higher, gathering the power more quickly.

He started to lower the red hand towards his own chest, but the boy, springing from the doorway, caught him by the left arm. The red hand swept down towards Arik. The dark power had built up to a killing level; it must be dispersed before touching the boy. Panicked, Reelandor jerked his arm quickly up and away and unleashed the power into the air.

An explosion rocked the tower. The force of the blast knocked Reelandor and the boy apart. Then stone and mortar, falling in pieces from the ceiling, rained down upon them. Reelandor fell hard against the floor and lost consciousness.

In the darkness there was a vision. Reelandor stood before the Lady. "What road would you have taken, Reelandor?" the Lady asked, her lovely voice heavy with sorrow.

"I have lost my soul, Lady. Now I must lose my life."

"The boy needs you. He is badly hurt. If you do not help him, he will die."

"I am not worthy to be a healer. My honor requires my death."

The Lady raised a slender hand. "Will you let the boy die to appease your honor?"

Reelandor bowed his head. "I am Nedral's own, Lady. All the years of devotion to You have come to nothing. I have killed again. I have claimed two more lives. I have chosen the path of destruction. You must not place faith in me."

"Look at me, Reelandor," the Lady ordered. Reelandor raised his eyes and saw the air beside the Lady grow thick and heavy. Nedral, the Dark God, stood at her side. The Lady of Mercy extended her shining right hand to clasp the blood-colored left hand of Nedral. In the air above the two of them another form, a God of Light and Shadow, shimmered, barely visible. "I am Nedral's bride," the Lady said. "Darkness is always the companion of Light. Live and save the child, Reelandor. You will not become the monster you fear."

The vision faded. Reelandor came slowly back to consciousness. *Arik, by the Gods, where is Arik?* Reelandor surveyed the destruction of the tower with growing fear. He could not even see the boy. A soft moan from what appeared to be a pile of rubble caught his attention. The boy was still alive.

Reelandor quickly freed the child from the fallen stones and poured his own energy into the small, inert form. The boy moaned again and opened his eyes. "Don't leave me, Uncle."

"I will stay as long as you need me, child." Tears blurred Reelandor's vision. And when the child's wounds were healed, Reelandor would pay for his crimes. "Now, sleep," he said softly to the boy.

Arik recovered slowly, but he continued to make progress. In a few more weeks, Reelandor knew, the boy would be well enough to be crowned. "You no longer need a healer, my lord," Reelandor said, rising from the boy's bedside. "You may have me arrested at any time. I am prepared."

"I will not arrest you, Uncle."

"You must. I killed your father. You saw it."

Arik shook his head firmly. "You are deluded, Uncle. My father died when the tower roof collapsed. An accident. I have told everyone the circumstances of his death."

Reelandor smiled grimly. He was still in light rapport with the boy and was well aware that Arik was lying. He had, indeed, seen Reelandor kill the king. "You know that is not so, Arik. Justice demands that you name me traitor and murderer. I killed Timon as well."

Arik lowered his eyes. "Please, Uncle. Do not make me do this. I need you. There is no other person in the world I love. My father was a monster." The boy choked. "If you had not killed him, I would have murdered him myself for what he did to Timon. The day he brought Timon to your tower, I stole some of your poisons. I would have killed him. I swear it."

The boy was telling the truth; Reelandor sensed it and shuddered. This gentle boy had been brought to the verge of patricide. What would such guilt have done to Arik? "If you will not denounce me, then I must take myself into exile. I have betrayed my vows."

The boy looked up at Reelandor. "Please, stay. I need you, Uncle. I'm so alone."

Reelandor looked into the boy's pleading eyes. By all the laws of the land, he knew he should be punished — killed or exiled — for what he had done. And there was his shattered vow. Could that ever be repaired? No, he could not stay.

"Uncle, please," Arik whispered. Reelandor looked down at the still, small face and it seemed to him that for the first time he truly saw the lonely boy who must be king.

"I will stay as long as you need me, Arik."

The boy reached out tentatively and touched Reelandor's right hand. "That may be a long time, Uncle," he said.

❧

Patricia Duffy Novak has been published in these pages twice previously, and has also contributed a story to each of the last three Darkover anthologies.

Living in Opelika, Alabama, with an assortment of cats and dogs, her husband Jim and her one-year-old daughter Sylvia, she is an associate professor of Agricultural Economics at Auburn University.

Bob Eggleton, who lives in Rhode Island, is a well-known fantasy-science fiction artist. He won the 1991 Chesley Award for Best Cover Illustration: Magazine.

He'll be illustrating the cover for a *FANTASY Magazine* issue early next year.

The Last Word

We have a story coming up that was so terrific, we moved it out of this issue's lineup and made it the cover story for the next issue. So you'll have to wait to read "Black Ribbon" by Dawn Hardin. After you do, I think you'll agree that it's one of the best stories of the year.

The cover for "Black Ribbon" is being done for us by Gail Butler, a talented artist from Washington state.

Other stories coming up in future issues include "Frog Prince" by Marella Sands, a Roman story by Darrell Schweitzer, and a haunting story by Sandra Morrese of a woman warrior who grows up after she is wounded.

Alicia Austin thought she was too busy to do any artwork for the next issue since she has several shows coming up — until I told her I had a Japanese monster I had hoped she could draw. So you'll see her illustrations for "The Tengu's Scroll" by Dana Kramer-Rolls. New Zealander Lyn McConchie returns with a story called "What Happy Ending?" And there'll be a new Marion Zimmer Bradley story that you'll all enjoy.

I am writing this a week after the close of the World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago. I took careful notes in the art show, and you'll soon be seeing some very talented artists appearing in these pages for the first time. Er, that's not quite how I meant to say that... If you're an artist and want to attract an editor's or art director's notice, there are few ways more effective than displaying your work regularly at convention art shows. Be sure your name and address are attached firmly and visibly to the exhibit. I am occasionally asked for art guidelines, but we don't really have any, other than describing the obvious that we need black-and-white interior illustrations. All artwork is individually commissioned after the stories are bought, and for that I have to see a body of consistently professional work which appeals to me. I can't pinpoint why I select one artist over another. Yet I pay close attention to what I like, since that's my only dependable guide to what you, the reader, might enjoy.

Marion's fans will be pleased to know that she will be attending the Darkover convention in Timonium, Maryland, at the end of November. By then, this new issue I'm writing about should be out, so look for it, and be sure to write and tell us what you think!

– Rachel E. Holmen

P.S. If you'd rather telecompute than use the mails, I can be reached on the Genie computer network as "R.Holmen".

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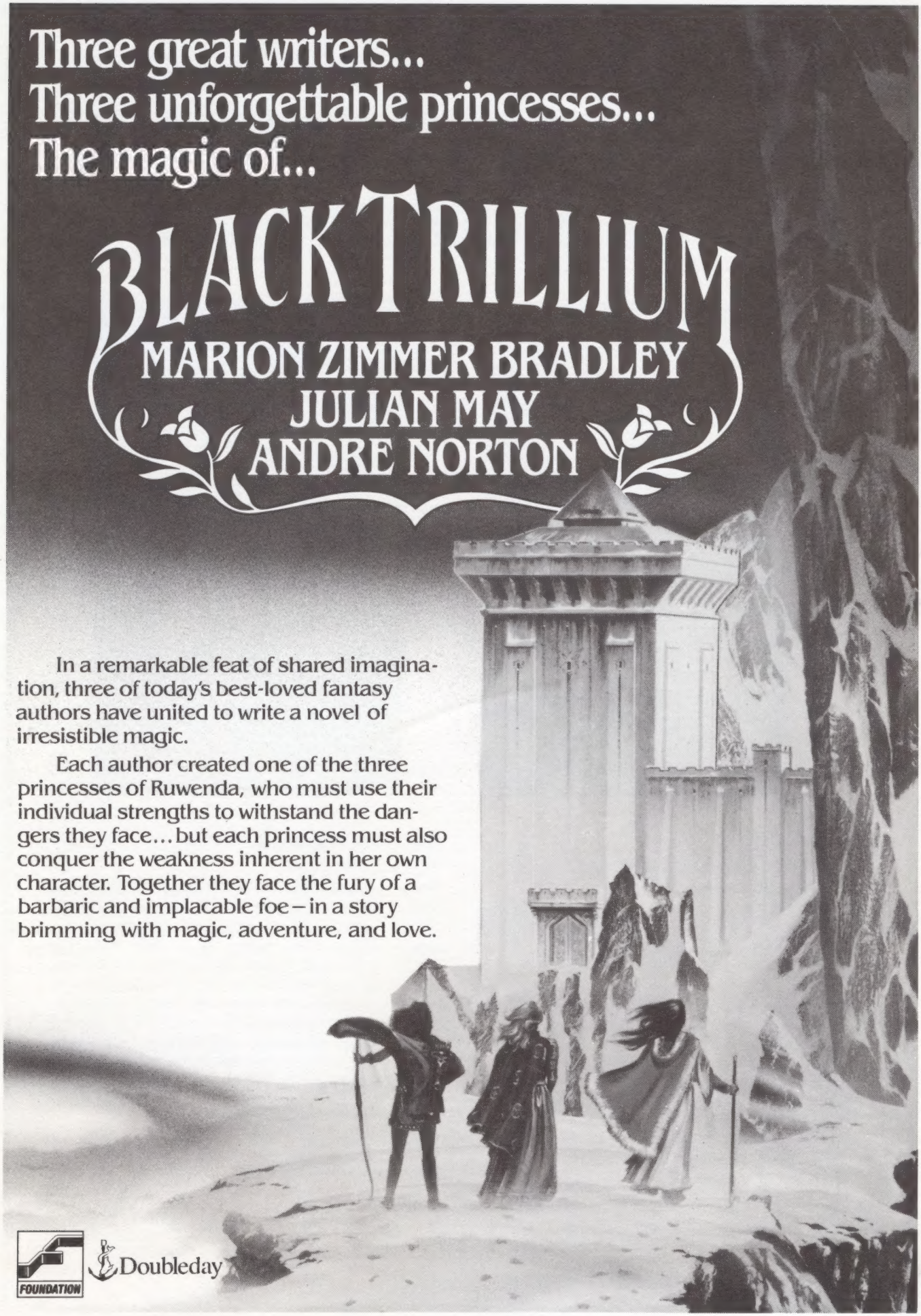

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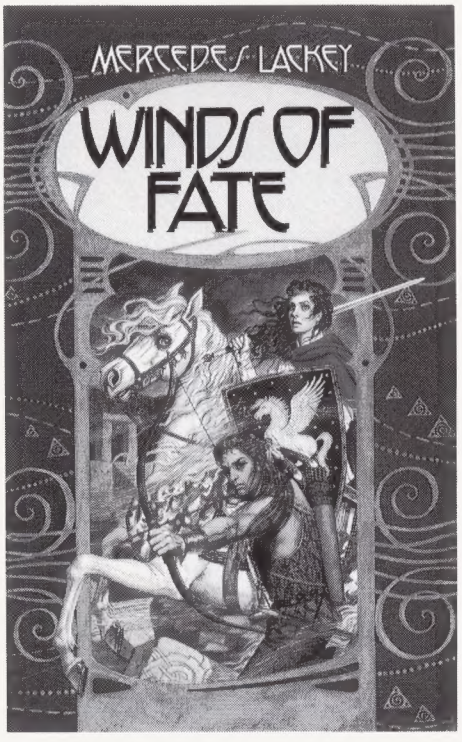

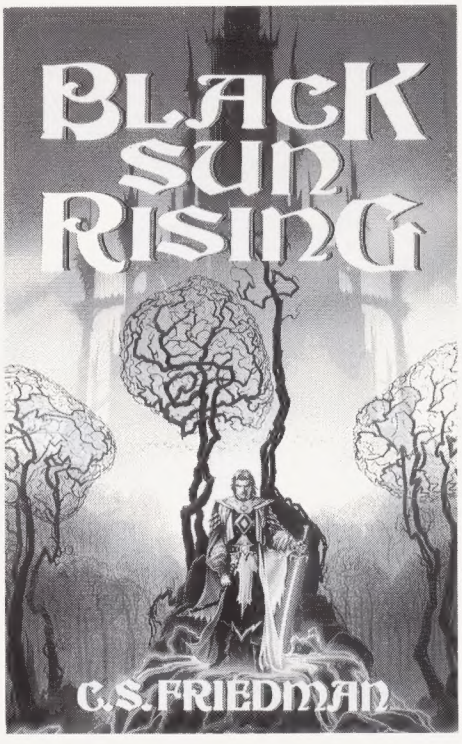

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